

# **Thai Administrative Structure and Reform: Problems with Decentralization**

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*Several factors hinder the successful decentralization of power in Thailand, such as the country's historical experience which favors centralization rather than decentralization, the problem of acceptance by high-level decision makers of the advantages of decentralization, legal impediments, people's lack of awareness of the concept of decentralization, etc. Should Thailand pursue complete decentralization through deconcentration and devolution of political power to the regions and localities, there should be serious attempts on the part of the central government to promote local self-government, and participation should be encouraged from all sectors of society. Success will depend on the political power wielders who will ultimately decide on the necessity for and the appropriateness of decentralization of power to the people.*

## **Introduction**

Administrative reforms are not something new in Thailand. In fact, such reforms have been implemented many times over the centuries in accordance with perceived needs. Whether the period considered is that of the Sukhothai era, the Ayudhaya era, or the Ratanakosin era, Thailand has been characterized by domestic changes and improvements throughout. Improvements have been both large-scale and small-scale, depending on what was possible at the time, and on royal wishes in so far as Thailand has been governed for many hundreds of years under a system of absolute monarchy.<sup>1</sup> A system of parliamentary democracy with a sovereign king under the constitution has only been in existence for approximately 51 years. Hitherto, governmental reforms were the sole prerogative of the king. The one exception was the period of change-over from absolute to constitutional monarchy in 1932, during the reign of

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King Prachadhipok (Rama VII). The change-over was a move initiated not by the king, but by the people. It should be noted, however, that it was effected by only a small group of men calling themselves "The People's Committee." This group was made up of educationalists and young officers influenced from abroad—the "Young Turks" of the time. The members of the group prided themselves with having introduced democracy in Thailand—although in fact the vast majority of Thais at that time did not know what democracy was.

One reason cited for Thailand's slow rate of development is that the internal reforms the country has experienced have not resulted in a suitable administrative structure. The last major administrative reform took place during the reign of Rama V, some 90 years ago.<sup>2</sup> In 1932, on the other hand, the change was one from a governmental system of absolute monarchy in which full power was vested in the king, to a democratic form of government, in which the king was sovereign under the constitution.

The change-over was supposed to have entailed a decentralization of power from the king to the people, although whether in actual fact such decentralization was possible or not is a problem which the Thai people are today still trying to resolve. The reason for this is because the decentralization of power requires appropriate *mechanisms* or strategies, which just cannot be served on a silver platter to the people; neither can they be easily acquired. Moreover, even though some mechanisms do exist, they require an administrative framework within which to operate. Such a framework would be the administrative structure within which the mechanisms or strategies can be suitably implemented. Only then can the country achieve its objectives. If it is assumed that coups d'état are indicative of a disjunction between the administrative structure and administrative mechanisms, it might be said that countries like the United States or United Kingdom in the past 50 years have been characterized by conjunctive administrative structures and administrative mechanisms, since there have been neither revolutions nor coups d'état in the period under concern. Neither has martial law been imposed in these two countries. Thailand, in contrast, has been characterized by coups d'état following virtually every democratic election.<sup>3</sup> Over the past 50 years, Thailand has had 21 governments, 14 times with a single-tiered parliament and a seven times with two-tiered parliament. The Cabinet has been reshuffled 50 times; there have been 23 constitutions, and there have been 16 ministers.<sup>4</sup> When looked at in this light, it cannot be denied that in Thailand, there is still a disjunction between the administrative structure and administrative mechanisms. Within this disjunction, there is, nonetheless, a certain viability which has been instrumental in maintaining national unity throughout this period.

There is, however, another dimension to the problems facing Thailand, over and above the disjunction between administrative structures and mechanisms; it is that administrative structures are not integrated with developmental needs.

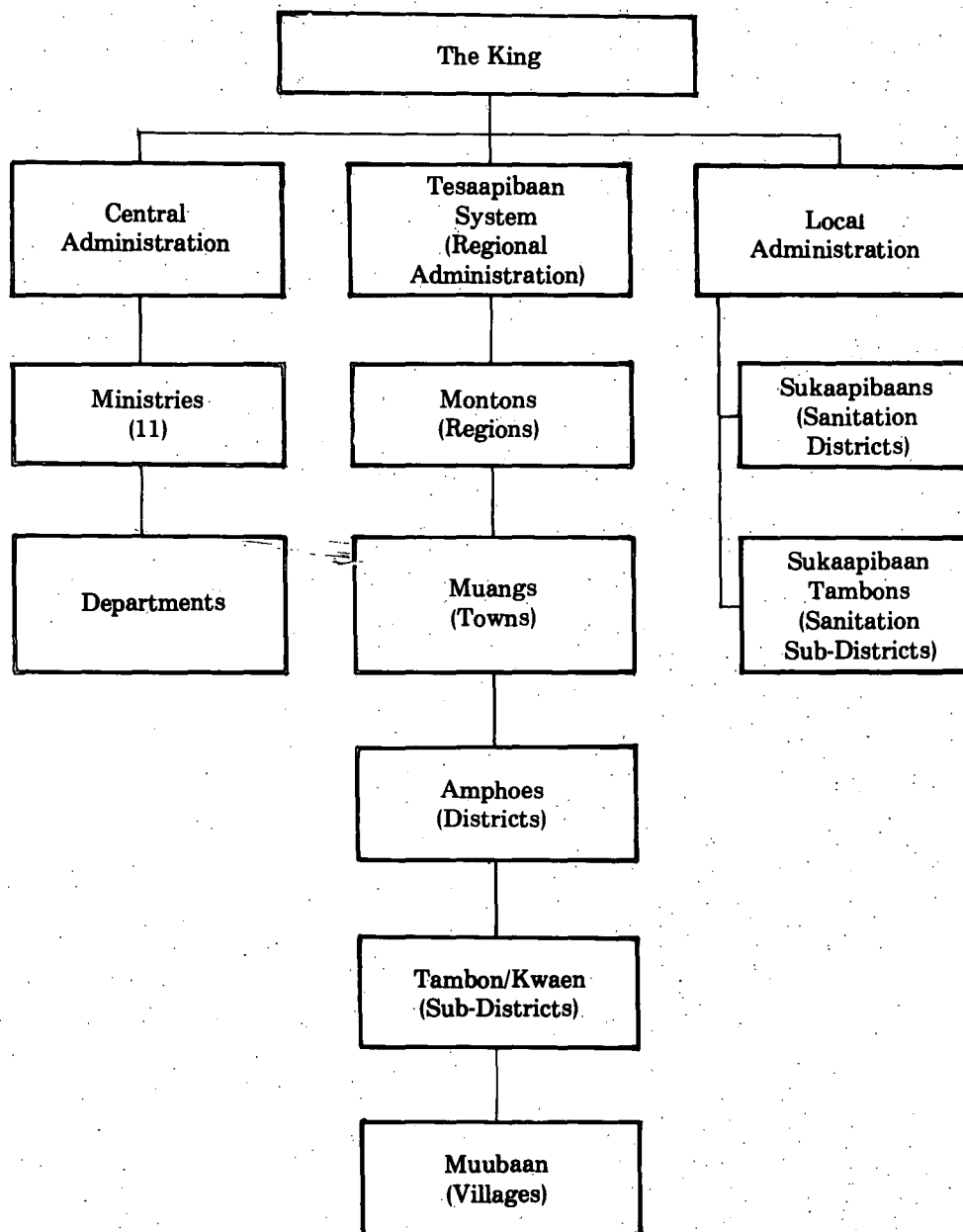
Thailand today has undergone development in many areas. The country has experienced consistent economic expansion ever since the first development plan up to and including the present Fifth Plan, with national income increasing from six to seven percent under every plan. This is not to say, however, that the country has undergone administrative reforms necessary for tackling its developmental needs. Thus, Thailand still has at least 10 million people, out of a population of 50 million people, living under the official poverty line. This has made it necessary for the government to extend aid in the form of rural developmental programs in impoverished areas, rural job-creation programs, and the like. These programs were initiated in 1975,<sup>5</sup> with the availability of rural development funds during the coalition government of Prime Minister Kikrit Pramroj. This type of program was designed to stimulate and support the policy of rural development, with the decentralization of administrative structures into the provinces.

A study of Thailand's history together with conditions today reveals that its administrative structure has been characterized by centralization rather than decentralization. But whatever label is applied, the Thai administrative system has its own unique features which have enabled the country to be governed without any violent upheavals that could have endangered the administrative apparatus. The single exception was during the disturbances of October 14, 1973, when the administration of the country was disrupted for half a day, necessitating a royal appeal for unity. It might be said that the Thai administrative system is relatively satisfactory, and at the very least, the country has not been plunged like some of its neighbors into domestic crises entailing anarchy and violence. Nonetheless, it cannot be said that the prevalent system is the best one for Thailand, since decentralization of power in the Thai context entails only a deconcentration of activities in the process of national administration, rather than an actual devolution of political power. In short, no other fundamental reform of the administrative structure has taken place since the reforms of Rama V.

### The Present Thai Administrative Structure

The Thai administrative structure today is an improved version of the administrative structure which emerged following a series of fundamental reforms during the reign of King Rama V of the Ratanakosin era (See Figure 1). These reforms were referred to by Rama VII as a "revolution." A major feature of this "revolution" was the consolidation of power in the hands of the king in Bangkok once again, after a period in which power had devolved to military and civilian officials in the central and peripheral areas. The second feature was the establishment of eleven ministries to administer both military and civilian matters, again centered in Bangkok. The first ministries evolved from the original *jatusadom* system consisting of four administrative elements

*Figure 1. The Thai Administrative Structure After the Fundamental Reforms of King Rama V (1894).*



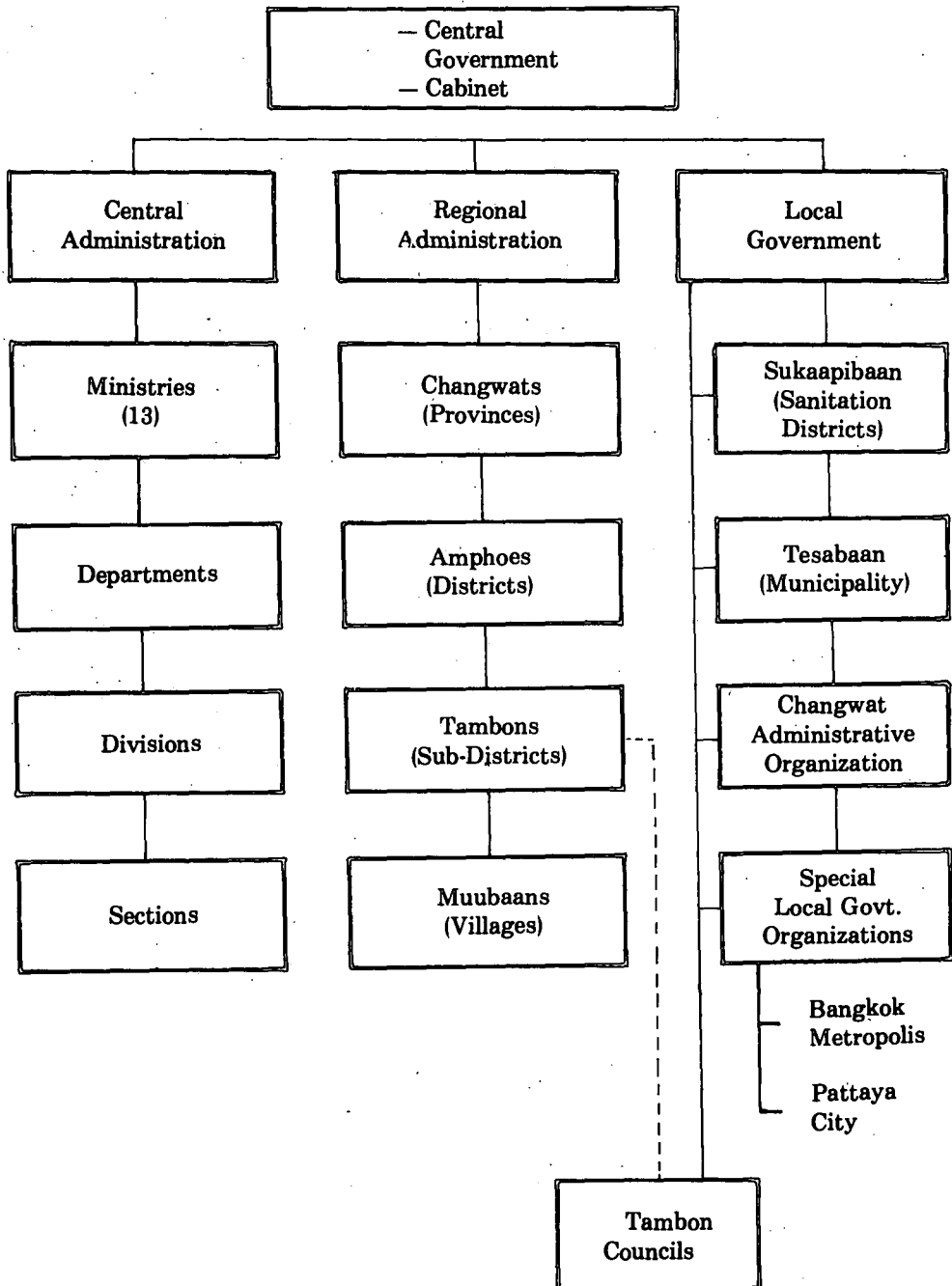
responsible for urban, palace, financial and rural matters respectively. The third feature saw the emergence of the *tesaapibaan* system of regional administration—a system in which all peripheral areas were responsible ultimately to the Ministry of Interior, thereby marking the end of private fiefdoms. A fourth feature was the development of local administration, with an emphasis for the first time on specific tasks, for example, cleanliness programs, the Bangkok sanitation districts programs, etc.<sup>6</sup>

Although Thailand has not experienced any other important administrative reform since the reign of Rama V, there have, however, been improvements from the legal standpoint, together with procedural adjustments in line with internationally accepted standards. Attempts have been made to apply the principles of centralization and decentralization in a manner most suited to the Thai administrative structure, as well as to upgrade local government in conformity with the principles of a democratic system which foster increased popular participation in politics and administration. There have been three major developments since the fundamental reforms of Rama V. Firstly, there has been a reorganization of the central administrative agencies, resulting in the emergence of 13 ministries. There has also been a proliferation of task-oriented programs and projects, including the development of state enterprises. Secondly, the *tesaapibaan* system has been abolished and replaced by a system of regional government. Thirdly, various forms of local government have emerged. (Please refer to Figure 2).

Under the present administrative structure, a central government located in Bangkok initiates the nation's policies and oversees their implementation. There are 13 ministries which serve as the mechanism whereby the work of the central government is carried out in both military and civilian matters. A Cabinet constitutes the central organization for implementing policies initiated by those political parties which make up the governing body of the country. Central government administration is characterized by a centralization of power in the interest of national security and the people's well-being, and in order to ensure uniformity in decision-making.

Regional administration, on the other hand, is characterized by a decentralization of power, insofar as the central government has decentralized some forms of decision-making to the regions. For example, central government agencies such as the Ministry of Interior only have the power to appoint or move senior regional administrators such as provincial governors, provincial under-secretaries, and district officers. Other than this, regional government units must act in compliance with central government policies as set out, for instance, in the Revolutionary Council Decree Number 218, Item 53(2), which empowers provincial governors to "carry out official duties in accordance with directives issued by the Cabinet, ministries, and departments; or on orders of the Prime Minister in his capacity as head of the Government."<sup>7</sup> Provinces' expenditures are financed from the national budget, and processed through

*Figure 2. The Present Thai Administrative Structure.*



ministries, departments, and administrative chiefs in accordance with financial regulations as drawn up by the central government.

Governmental units have been organized into *changwats* (provinces) and *amphoes* (districts). At two lower levels are the *tambons* (sub-districts) and *muubaans* (villages), in accordance with the Provincial Administration Act of 1932. Thus, regional administration is involved with organizations at four levels, namely, the province, district, sub-district, and village. The sub-district *per se* has in fact been abolished and been replaced by the sub-district council, which is a cross between an administrative unit of regional government and that of local government.

There are four kinds of local government, comprising administrative organizations for the provinces, *tesabaans* (municipalities), *sukaapibaans* (sanitation districts), and the special forms of local government, viz., Bangkok Metropolis and Pattaya City. There is, furthermore, a mixed form of local government organization, namely the sub-district councils, which represent a decentralization of power. The sub-district councils are a legal entity with a certain degree of self-government—a feature which encourages popular participation in the Thai system of democratic government.

The *Sukaapibaan* (Sanitation District) is an administrative unit established under the Sanitation District Act of 1952.<sup>8</sup> There is very little decentralization of power under the sanitation district system, since the personnel involved are sent into the provinces from central government agencies. These personnel are, for instance, the district officers, district undersecretaries, etc. Furthermore, the provincial governors also exercise power over the sanitation districts. On the other hand, the sanitation district has a certain degree of financial autonomy because it has a source of income from excise duties, services rendered, and the issue of permits over and above the funds allocated for it by the province.

The *Tesabaan* (Municipality) are of three types, namely the *tesabaan tambon* (sub-district municipality), *tesabaan muang* (urban municipality), and *tesabaan nakorn* (city municipality). The criteria applied in determining the type of municipality are as follows: the city municipality must have not less than 50,000 people, with a population density not less than 3,000 persons per square kilometer. There must also be a sufficient amount of local income generated. The urban municipality must not have a population of less than 10,000, with a population density of 3,000 people per square kilometer. It must also have a sufficient locally generated income. No clear-cut population or income criteria have, however, been drawn up concerning the sub-district municipalities.

Of the various forms of local government, the municipality has the greatest dispersion of power. Even so, the municipalities are also under the control of provincial governors or district officers. Within the municipalities, *nayok tesamontriis* (mayors) are elected by the people in the area, with official appointments made by the provincial governors. The municipal

councils are authorized to collect taxes and duties, and to issue permits. Income from these, combined with that derived from the provision of public services, is used to finance the operations of the municipalities.<sup>9</sup>

Each *changwat* or province has one central administrative unit. The administrative structure consists of the provincial governor and an elected provincial council. Provincial officers are paid out of provincial funds. A feature of provincial administration is the decentralization of power under the overall direction of the governor. The *palad changwat* (provincial undersecretary) acts as undersecretary of the provincial administrative office, while the provincial council controls all expenditures. The provincial administrative office is legally entitled to an income from, for instance, duties, services, the issue of permits, etc.<sup>10</sup>

Special forms of local government are the Bangkok Metropolis and Pattaya City.

The Bangkok Metropolis is divided into *khets* (precincts) and *kwaengs* (sub-precincts). It exhibits features of both regional and local government in the sense that it has the status of a province, which is a regional government entity, and it has the Bangkok Metropolitan Council, which is akin to a local government entity. In the first four years after its designation as a metropolis (1971-1974), both the governor and council members of Bangkok were appointed. In 1975, the governor and council members were elected, with the latter made up of one representative from each precinct. In early 1977, a serious conflict between the governor and deputy governor led to the subsequent abolition of the system of an elected governor. At present, the governor and council members of Bangkok Metropolis are appointed. This type of local government can be regarded as being centralized, because of the control exercised by the Ministry of Interior. Although the governor is appointed by the Prime Minister, he has authority over metropolitan personnel. His budgetary powers, however, are limited to a fund of not more than 2 million baht. Bangkok Metropolis does, however, have an income derived from the same sources as the municipalities.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, the administration of Pattaya City differs from that of the municipalities and Bangkok Metropolis. The mayor of Pattaya is appointed by members of the Pattaya Council, and has no administrative powers. He only functions as a community representative or leader. At the same time, however, he is the chairman of the Pattaya City Council, which consists of two types of members: the first type, with nine members, is elected; the second type, with eight members, is appointed by the Ministry of Interior. Council members hold office for four years. The administrative head of Pattaya is the undersecretary of Pattaya City, who has two deputy undersecretaries. These officials are approved by the city councilors upon recommendation of the mayor of Pattaya. Their salaries and terms governing the termination of their jobs, however, are in accordance with contracts drawn up as stipulated by the Ministry of Interior. The



administrative system for Pattaya City can be regarded as constituting a special form of power decentralization since the Ministry of Interior exercises a form of control through the contracts it draws up covering salaries and termination of employment. Control is also exercised over the mayor himself, because the Minister of Interior, upon recommendation by the governor of Chonburi Province, has the power to dissolve Pattaya City Council.<sup>12</sup>

The administration of the *Tambon* (Sub-District) councils is performed by sub-district council committees. Although the sub-district council does not have the status of a legal entity, it can in practice incur debts through application of specific regulations or orders. For example, a regulation issued by the Office of the Prime Minister in 1980 concerning job-creation programs in the provinces stipulated that sub-district councils can incur debts. The sub-district council system can be regarded as a mixed form of power decentralization. While the *kamnans* (sub-district chiefs), village heads, and sub-district doctors are appointed by the provincial governors, other members—one from each village—are elected by duly qualified persons within individual villages. A budget provided by the central government is available for villagers to conduct their own elections.<sup>13</sup>

From the above discussion concerning the three-fold division of the Thai administrative system, two forms of decentralization of power in the Thai administrative structure can be discerned.

(1) *Administrative Decentralization*. This form of decentralization is most widely seen in regional government. Other forms of administrative decentralization are evident in, for example, financial procedures, planning procedures, or in the various specific projects and programs. This form of decentralization is regarded by some scholars as a deconcentration of power, and is thus still a form of concentration of power.

(2) *Local Self-Government*. There is a certain degree of autonomy, insofar as this form of decentralization is concerned, because there is some degree of financial autonomy; there are definite territorial bounds as well as a definite population; and local governments are legal entities with decision-making powers regulated by law.

Although administrative decentralization has been practiced since the earliest days of the Thai nation, local self-government has only been in existence since the first legislation setting up the sanitation districts (which are local government units) in the reign of King Rama V of the Ratanakosin era. Over time, however, the mix between the two forms of administrative system in Thailand has rendered clear-cut distinctions virtually impossible. Nonetheless, certain criteria can be applied in studying the process of administrative decentralization, as follows:

(1) *Territorial Criteria*. Decentralization of power implies that the center accords decision-making powers to units at the local level, namely, the muni-

icipalities, sanitation districts, Pattaya City, Bangkok Metropolis, and the provincial administrative organizations. Self-government in this respect means decision-making powers over both policies and the implementation thereof. In deconcentration of power, in contrast, the central government delegates certain powers at the regional level to the provinces and districts, which are agents of the center. The *de jure* and *de facto* selection of officials at the regional level is also conducted from the center, whereas local government officials are selected through elections (except in the Bangkok Metropolis). Local governments have a certain degree of administrative autonomy. Some or all of their personnel and budget are fully under their control, and such government, with the exception of sub-district councils, are legal entities separate from the center.

(2) *Behavioral Criteria.* The decentralization of power entails delegation of decision-making powers to local government agencies. Needs are identified and actions initiated by the local populace. Administrators are elected at the local level. Officials are selected from the localities, acting as *representatives* of the localities and with loyalty to their particular localities. The deconcentration of power entails the delegation of decision-making powers to representatives of the central government, who are dependent on the center for policy directives. Because of this arrangement, many provincial governors lack initiative and behave only as *surrogates for the central government*. A reason which accounts for such behavior is that in Thailand the principle of deconcentration of power is still strictly adhered to. But over and above this are factors that hamper provincial governors to act on their own initiative. They may, for example, be pressured by the military which is responsible for national security, and by people who do not understand the country's administrative system. These groups can make the work of provincial governors more difficult because governors do not have so much power, strictly speaking, commensurate to the authority and influence due their positions. How much is achieved depends on how each governor uses his authority and influence.

(3) *Financial Criteria.* One important criterion to determine if decentralization of power is most complete and most effective is the *financial* factor. Even if something is viable on paper, the lack of adequate finances will hamper its success. In Thailand, municipalities on the whole are faced with severe financial problems, necessitating budgetary support from the center. But this in turn entails supervision of projects by the central government, thereby reducing the local autonomy which lies at the heart of self-government. In pursuing the objective of decentralization, therefore, it is necessary to develop income-acquiring or income-generating capabilities, as well as the ability to administer finances. In contrast, deconcentration involves administration of finances which have been allocated from the center. This means that there is no financial independence at the local level. Rather, expenditures are pre-determined

by the central government, or are program-specific. There is no need to look elsewhere for financing, unless it is for projects not covered by the budget allocated, or unless it is to supplement the budget. Only under special circumstances does this happen. Thus, while most municipalities in Thailand are dependent on the central government for finances, local governments are dependent on their own abilities in financing their budgets.

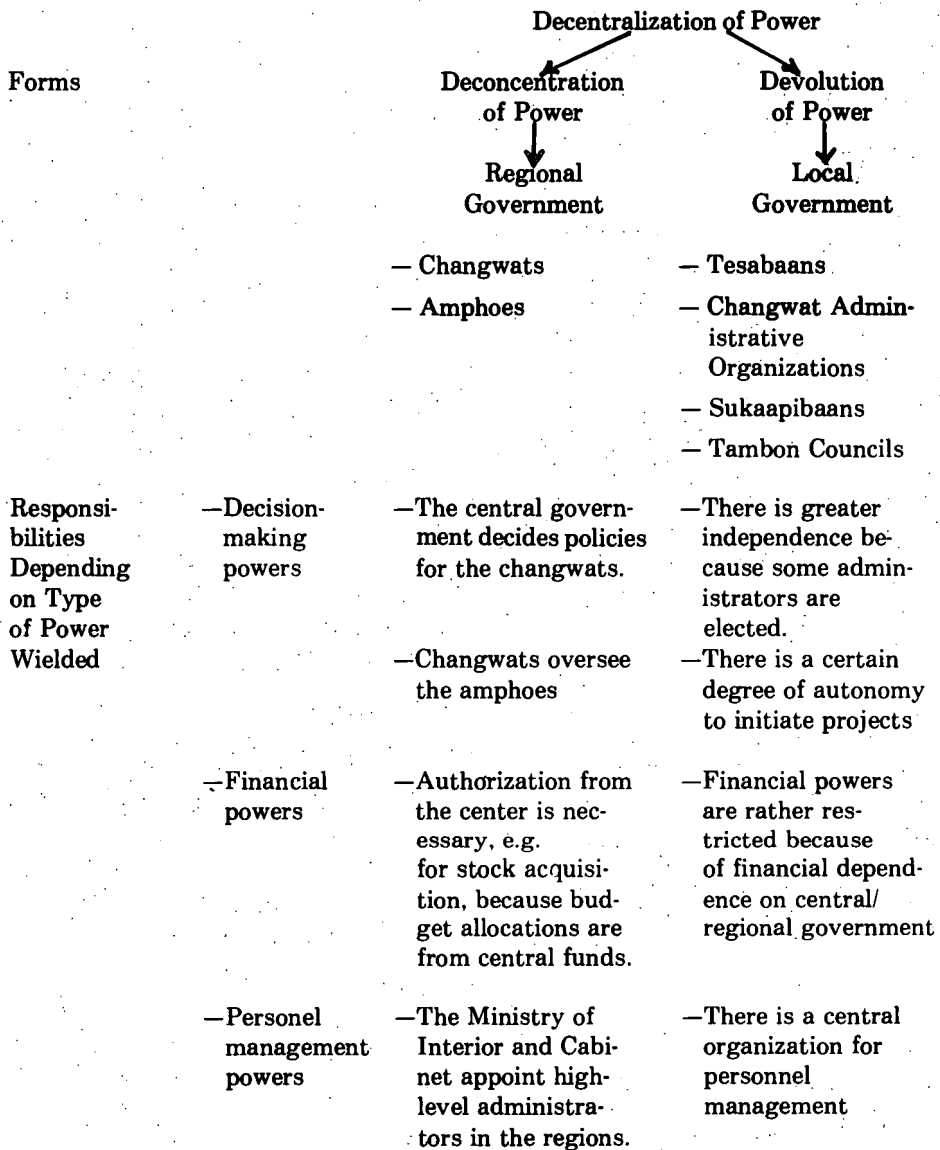
(4) *Personnel Administration Criteria.* In a decentralized system, personnel at all levels from the top down should be elected. Moreover, personnel in every type of administrative organization should also be elected. In Thailand, however, different types of local government administration exhibit different features regarding this aspect. What is of note is that apart from the municipality system, there are no other administrative systems which elect personnel. They are either bound up with the central administrative system, or operate along the same lines. For example, the Bangkok Metropolis Personnel Commission which oversees local government personnel at all levels, applies the same rules and regulations as those used by the Civil Service Commission. The Minister of Interior is president of the Commission, and the eight other members are composed of the Undersecretary of the Ministry of Interior, Director General of the Department of Government, etc. It can be said, therefore, that even though there is a form of decentralization because some administrative personnel are elected, the central government still has the upper hand in the exercise of power. Regional administrations, operating under the power decentralization system, have greater or lesser power in personnel management depending on the dictates of individual central government ministries. Thus the Ministry of Interior, for instance, empowers governors to transfer and replace personnel in certain levels but only within provincial boundaries. If governors want to transfer personnel across provincial boundaries, they must request the ministry of the personnel involved to effect such transfers. In sum, it can be said that in Thailand, power is decentralized in both local government and regional government administrations, but the extent to which decentralization has taken place is very limited.

A better appreciation of the two forms of power decentralization may be obtained from an examination of Diagram 1.

### Forms of Decentralization

Three forms of decentralization in Thailand have been implemented as follows: *firstly*, there is a decentralization of power to governmental units territorially, i.e., decentralization towards the regions—provinces and districts—in a manner akin to local state government. *Secondly*, there is a decentralization of power to territorial units, together with some decision-making powers. For instance, some administrators may be elected, but the central or regional governments still exercise control over finances and poli-

Diagram 1. Forms of Decentralization in Thailand.\*



\*This diagram is a revision based on an interview with Professor Dr. Chakrit Norenitipudungkarn, an expert on the Thai administrative system.<sup>14</sup>

cies. Thus, there is no local self-government as such, only local government. This form is seen in Bangkok Metropolis, Pattaya City, the municipalities, the provincial administrative organizations, the sanitation districts, and the sub-district councils. *Thirdly*, there is a decentralization of power to given agencies, with specific *activities* or functions. Examples of this form are the Regional Electricity Generating Authority, the Telephone Organization of Thailand, etc.

If decentralization of power is looked at in terms of local self-government, it can be said that such decentralization definitely does not exist in Thailand at present, although it is a goal which is being pursued. John G. Clarke<sup>15</sup> has defined local governments as governmental units with powers and responsibilities over services for the population of a specific territorial unit. These units of government are set up by, and are under the control of, the central government. Prataan Kongritsueksaakorn<sup>16</sup> has proposed that local governments be regarded as agencies set up by law with the status of a legal entity, because of the following factors: they have freedom of self-government; their officers are elected; they are able to finance their work themselves; they can initiate policies and issue regulations as a framework for action. But in the final analysis, local governments are still ultimately under the control of the central government, in the interests of national security and the general well-being of the people.

From the preceding discussion, it is perhaps clear that local government in Thailand does not exhibit the features of true self-government. Nonetheless, it appears to conform most to the model described by Clarke. Furthermore, the United Nations study on *Decentralization for National and Local Development*<sup>17</sup> offers a better insight into the Thai system of decentralization of power.

Local government in the context of this study is the transfer of authority away from the national capital. Such a transfer is possible through the process of delegating power and authority, for example, the delegation of power to field offices representing central government agencies. Another method of transfer is the devolution of power to various local government agencies. The U.N. study shows that decentralization of power also includes deconcentration of power. From this standpoint, therefore, there is decentralization of power in Thailand, but the degree of decentralization depends on the needs and necessities of each situation. Thus, in time of war the degree of decentralization has been minimized to facilitate the transmission of commands. In peacetime attention has turned again to the decentralization of power. The fact that there is no complete decentralization is probably due to the Thai proclivity not to push things to extremes.

Although it can be said that there is some decentralization of power in Thailand in both regional and local governments, it must be said that decentralization in the latter, which agrees with the internationally accepted model of power decentralization, is very much restricted in the Thai case for the following reasons:

(1) All local government agencies in Thailand have their powers and responsibilities clearly defined by law. The operation of the municipalities, for example, is controlled by a Municipalities Act drawn up by the central government.

(2) Ministers and the Cabinet are able to intervene in the government of the Bangkok Metropolis, to act over and above what has been stipulated in the Bangkok Metropolitan Act.

(3) As all local government agencies are dependent on financing from the central government, the latter is able to control expenditure. The effect is that local government agencies lack the support necessary for a stronger operational role, and are unable to stand on their own. It is because of this financial control which is exercised by the central government over local governments that a full decentralization of power is not possible.<sup>18</sup>

(4) There is a Municipal Workers Commission to oversee personnel administration, but local government personnel are required to reside in local government areas where they are assigned. They, however, want for the most part to work in the local government areas such as Bangkok Metropolis, Chiangmai, Haadyai, etc., which offer more opportunities for advancement.

### Reasons for Centralization

Any country which is characterized by a centralization of power will at the same time be characterized by a decentralization of power; but the extent of decentralization will depend on suitability and prevailing requirements. It is probably not really fair to say that centralization of power is in itself a bad thing because it inhibits freedom of expression and action and the development of democracy, which has been accepted as a decentralizing phenomenon. It should be noted, rather, that a mixed system of power decentralization together with greater or lesser degrees of centralization, has enabled Thailand to maintain its independence and to remain self-governing for over 900 years. Several reasons are suggested to explain Thailand's greater degree of centralization than decentralization.

(1) *Historical Reasons.* Generally speaking, it can be said that all processes of nation-building have involved centralization of power. Thailand is no exception. During the nation-building period (circa 1257 when Sukhothai was the capital)<sup>19</sup> the king governed on the basis of a centralization of power because the survival of the Thai nation was at stake. The administrative system of the Sukhothai era consisted of a series of outpost towns encircling the capital city at a distance of approximately 50 kilometers, or within two travelling days. Members of the royal family were sent out to govern these towns, which served as a line of defense against the enemies of Sukhothai. Farther towns and the tributary states had their own rulers who had to send tribute to Sukhothai at periodic intervals. The kings of Sukhothai were autocratic and governed with absolute powers. Ayudhaya, which succeeded Sukhothai as the major center of the Thai nation, also used the same administrative system as its predecessor. There was a greater degree of complexity, however, because of the greater area which had to be governed. Nonetheless, the administrative structure was fundamentally the same in its territorial aspects. In other words, there was a capital city exercising suzerainty over outpost towns and tributary states. The only difference was that the towns had changed. It was not until the reign of Phra Baromatrailokanaat the Great (1448-1484) that important administrative reforms took place. Even then, it was more a matter of internal administrative reforms rather than a structural reform of the administrative system, such as the creation of the *sakdinaa* system. The *jatusadom* system of government was also improved and divided into military and civilian branches in order to bring about a clear-cut delineation of responsibilities.

The military and civilian branches of the administrative system were separated with the intention that they would not encroach on each other's area of responsibility. In practice, however, there were many problems because at the time that the *samuhakalaahom* (head of the military branch) and *samuhanaayok* (head of the civilian branch) position<sup>20</sup> were established, the king allowed the latter, who controlled the civilian populace of the center to control military forces in the outpost towns as well. In contrast, the *samuhakalaahom* controlled only the military forces of the capital city, and was responsible for preparing the population for war. The outcome was that most of the work fell on the *samuhanaayok*, who became commander of the outpost towns in time of war. His position became, in fact, the most important one next to that of the king. As responsibilities increased over time, there was greater tension between the *samuhakalaahom* and the *samuhanaayok*. For this reason, therefore, another reform was instituted during the reign of Somdej Phra Narai the Great in 1656. The *samuhakalaahom* was given control of outpost towns in the North, while the *samuhanaayok* was given control of outpost towns in the South. The *kromklang* or head of the treasury was given control of outpost towns on the Gulf of Siam, which were engaged mainly in

trade. The two *samuhas*, on the other hand, were in total control of both military and civilian activities in their respective spheres of power.<sup>21</sup>

In the traditional Thai system of government, the chain of command extended from the king as the center of power. A capable king could keep his subjects under control, whereas a weak king was always in danger of insubordination on the part of his courtiers and governors of the various towns. This state of affairs, combined with the division of the country into two major administrative areas, was not conducive to a trouble free administrative structure. Conflicts over spheres of influence between the two major administrators as well as with the *kromklang* increased more and more. As all activities were under control of the three officials and especially the two *samuhas*, there was an extensive degree of confusion in administration due to power rivalries among the three. This was compounded by the fact that each of the three major officials had many responsibilities, ranging from the administrative sphere to the legal sphere. Some jobs were overstaffed because of the pecuniary rewards, while others were understaffed because of the absence thereof. As King Rama V correctly observed, by his time the traditional administrative system was already in chaos, thereby affecting the morale of the people. There were numerous spheres of influence, including those of the outpost towns; military and civilian affairs were combined; commands were issued with great difficulty, as at times it was not known through whom the commands were to be transmitted. This resulted in a reduction of the king's power. At that time, however, Thailand was threatened by the Western powers, a development which required the king to unify and stabilize the country, as well as modernize it. This was necessary in order to forestall claims that the country was barbaric and hence had to be brought under colonial rule. To solve these various problems, King Rama V initiated extensive and far-reaching improvements. These were regarded historically as the most important structural reforms of the entire administrative system.<sup>22</sup>

(2) *The Nature of Events.* When Rama V instituted fundamental reforms, he left a legacy which served to maximize the centralization of power, namely the *tesaapibaan* system.<sup>23</sup> This system focused power on the Ministry of Interior, and was the precursor of the system of regional government. It was a system in which administrative agencies were run by non-aristocratic officials who took the pressure off the central government based in the capital city. These agencies were close to the people, and responsibilities were clearly defined, as were those of the central government ministries.

It should be noted that one reason the restructuring of the administrative system took this form was because the king wanted to obliterate the control of powerful government officials. The king also wanted to end the system of *kinmuang*, which hitherto had enabled governors to levy taxes, recruit workers, and to build personal power bases. Furthermore, the king also aimed



to get rid of officials holding multiple positions.<sup>24</sup> In order to achieve these various objectives, the most trusted servants of the king were given the highest offices, but central control was maintained by the Ministry of Interior. Thus, the tesaapibaan system could be regarded as a decentralization of power in the form of a deconcentration of power. Of greater concern here, however, is the fact that it was due to the nature of events during the reign of Rama V that the Ministry of Interior became the center of power of the tesaapibaan system.

From then on, the Ministry of Interior gradually extended control over regional affairs up to the present to the extent that regional offices of other ministries were always subservient to the Ministry of Interior in one way or another. For example, the provincial governors, who are responsible for the regions, have been selected exclusively from the Ministry of Interior ever since the fundamental reforms of Rama V. Although there is talk today of electing the provincial governors, this does not seem highly feasible due to the power wielded by the Ministry of Interior. Interviews with senior officials of the Ministry reveal that they are not yet ready to have provincial governors elected; however, it is agreed that while governors do not necessarily have to be Ministry of Interior officials, they must nonetheless be accountable to the Ministry. Analyses by academics reveal that the Ministry of Interior refuses to decentralize because of vested interest and power associated with the present system.<sup>25</sup> This has led some academics today to accept the present administrative structure, and to try and achieve some form of decentralization within it.

### Bangkok-centrism

In addition to the foregoing comparative analysis covering the dimensions of power decentralization, there is another feature arising from the centralization of power during the reign of Rama V, which resulted in Bangkok becoming the center of power. This feature has been called "Bangkok-centrism" by Likhit Teeravekin,<sup>26</sup> which means that Bangkok is the center of everything in Thailand—politics, government, economics, education, etc. Likhit's thesis is that Bangkok-centrism has had negative results. In government, for example, this feature has been an obstacle to the decentralization of power and has prevented the development of real self-government.

The failure to decentralize had at least three consequences politically. Firstly, the failure of the local government system to inculcate democratic principles had repercussions at the national level. Secondly, the effect of "Bangkok-centrism" has been that whatever happens in Bangkok tended to affect the country as a whole. Thirdly, imbalanced development of the country has resulted in increased regional dissatisfaction with Bangkok,<sup>27</sup> and has led

to a distinct gap between the poor and the rich. There are 10 million people classified as severely impoverished within the country. This has necessitated job creation programs in rural areas through the Rural Development Fund initiated in 1975 during the coalition government headed by Kukrit Pramoj.<sup>28</sup>

Apart from the negative effects politically and administratively engendered by Bangkok-centrism, there have been negative effects economically and socially. This is reflected, for instance, in unequal educational opportunities and job prospects. This has resulted in a brain drain in favor of Bangkok. Doctors, for example, are lured by the medical challenges and monetary rewards which Bangkok offers.

The locus of administrative power in Bangkok consists of the Cabinet and the Ministry of Interior. The reason for this is not an unusual one, and can be traced back to the fundamental administrative reforms of Rama V. The centralizing effects of these reforms were the following:

(1) The former governmental system based on a series of outpost towns encircling the capital city was abolished. The offices of the six *senaabodiis* were also abolished and replaced by eleven ministries. This was tantamount to a centralization of power, since the eleven ministries were situated in Bangkok.

(2) The taxation system was reformed and the central taxation agency was centralized with the Ministry of the Royal Treasury. This had the effect of strengthening the executive. A strong executive is dependent on a number of supportive factors and no factor is as important as money.

(3) Laws were revised and courts reorganized to conform to a uniform pattern throughout the country. Thus, for example, the same legal code was applied throughout the land and extended to foreigners who had committed crimes in Thailand.

(4) The traditional system of conscription and indentured labor was replaced by a system of military conscription along the same lines as the West. The military itself was also reorganized along Western lines.

(5) Bangkok became the cultural center of the country through educational reforms designed to produce personnel who would continue with the reforms.

(6) Bangkok became the transportation and communications center, controlling the postal and telegraphic services; constituting the hub of the network of roads, etc.

The people became used to this highly centralized system over time, and over the past 90 years or so (1891-1982), reforms of the Thai administrative system have not managed to break away from this system of power centralization. Even though there has been some decentralization of power to the regions, it is still fundamentally a centralized system of power in terms of structure and processes. This is because even though deconcentration of power in Thailand is a form of power decentralization, in practice the regions still have to follow the dictates of the center, especially those emanating from the

Ministry of Interior and Cabinet. An interesting case in which centralization of power is manifested as a decentralization of power is that of the rural job creation program.

The job creation program in rural areas was first implemented in 1975 during the premiership of Kikrit Pramoj, under the official title of "Project to Develop Local Areas and Assist the Rural Population in Finding Work During the Dry Season." This became known, however, as the "Revolving Fund Project."

Because it was the first of its kind, and was implemented rather quickly in order to alleviate rural hardship and prevent the migration of rural people into Bangkok, the revolving fund project encountered numerous difficulties.

Even though innumerable problems beset the program in its initial stages, its usefulness and importance became apparent in creating jobs which led to a reduction in poverty and unemployment and the necessity of the program for rural development became recognized. Subsequent governments therefore maintained programs of a similar type, under different names. During the premiership of Kriangsak Chomanan, the name used was "Project to Revitalize the Economy of Rural Areas Affected by Natural Disasters."

The present government has administered the job-creation program in rural areas for three years, starting in 1980. Apart from this, the government has incorporated the program, together with the Rural Development Project, in the Fifth National Plan. This is indicative of a determined and sincere effort to aid the majority of people in the country. The government has tried to correct the faults of previous job-creation programs, the major one being that previously, the budget available was divided by the number of villages in order to obtain an equitable share for all. The effect of this was impermanent results and lower returns on investments than desirable. This was because sub-district councils lacked technical expertise, and there was no technical supervision provided to compensate for this. Other problems arose because planning capabilities did not exist; projects were not integrated with other developmental activities or agencies; there was no administrative body for the projects at district levels, or for liaising between sub-districts and provinces—even though the districts are closer to the local population than are the provinces. Finally, access to the funds allocated was a slow and difficult procedure, and the really needy groups within the population were not able to receive the full benefits in accordance with the objectives laid down by the government.

#### Attempts at Administrative Reform

Thailand is a country that has always been regarded as being able to adapt to prevailing circumstances. Administrative reforms have been one mechanism in the process of adaptation; and all governments have attempted adminis-

trative reforms of one kind or another. Section 5, Article 21 of the Constitution of 1978 states that "The State must organize the civil and military services, as well as other activities of the State, so as to achieve real efficacy . . ." This probably best illustrates national intentions. Implicit in the statement is the goal of increasing efficiency through administrative reforms, which are accepted as an indispensable means for national development. It is perhaps due to this reason that all governments have set up a special committee to study the administrative system of the state. This committee is composed of government officials, academics, and other qualified persons. The committee is dissolved at the end of each government's term of office, and reconstituted when a new government is formed. This committee was previously called the "Advisory Committee to the Prime Minister on Administrative Regulations,"<sup>28</sup> and was responsible for recommending ways in which the administrative system could be improved. Such recommendations could extend to restructuring of the administrative system as well as methods of operations. Membership of the committee was changed whenever appropriate. Later on, this committee became the "Committee for the Reform of the National Administrative System and Regulations,"<sup>29</sup> thus expanding its scope of operations. No longer was it to be just an advisory committee to the Prime Minister, which in practice meant making recommendations to the government. This committee at present consists of eight sub-committees, within which as many as four are sub-committees concerned with improving the administrative system. These are the: (1) Sub-Committee for the Study of Systemic and Structural Reforms of Government Agencies; (2) Sub-Committee for the Study of Regional and Local Government Reforms; (3) Sub-Committee for the Study of Ways for Amending and Improving Government Regulations; (4) Sub-Committee for the Study of New Government Sub-Divisions.

Apart from this, the government has emphasized the problem of improving the administrative system in the Fifth National Economic and Social Development Plan (1982-1986), and has insisted that they are problems which all parties concerned must help resolve:

Thus, it can be seen that the development capabilities of the Government's administrative mechanisms are also limited in many ways. This is because there have been insufficient improvements in the Government's system of development administration, both at the center and in the regions, so as to solve all the problems that are emerging. A good system for coordinating activities is still non-existent. Such a system would serve in establishing policies and in the implementation of plans, as well as help in coordinating the resolution of economic problems in conjunction with the private sector. It should be noted that problems on the whole are mainly structural ones, which cannot be resolved piecemeal and in a short span of time; what is needed, rather, is an understanding on the part of and cooperation from all parties concerned, who must accept the realities of the situation at present.<sup>30</sup>

The preceding paragraphs illustrate the attempts by the state to improve the overall administrative system. But the attempts also clearly aim at systemic

reform through a decentralization of power, as expressed in the Fifth Plan. Specifically, this means the alleviation of poverty in backward rural areas; the implementation of plans; and the emphasis on cooperation between the government and private sectors, as follows:

The emphasis (is) on "the alleviation of poverty" in backward rural areas. This is an important objective, aimed at enabling people in such areas to help themselves, to be part of the production process, and to participate in the process of national development in the future.

The emphasis (is) on the implementation of plan. This is to be achieved through reforms in planning processes, drawing up of the national budget, and in personnel administration so as to complement one another. At the same time it is intended to improve or develop government agencies both central and regional so as to be capable of implementing policies and important development plans in accordance with stated objectives. This is to be achieved through "operational plans" at ministry level, and in the most important branches of government concerned with developmental activities. Concurrently, the National Economic and Social Development Board shall draw up a "3-Year Investment Plan" as an aid in planning the national budget and securing foreign loans and assistance. In this respect, the Fifth Economic and Social Development Plan shall serve only as a policy framework. At the same time, decentralization of administrative power to the regions and localities shall be speeded up in the interests of national development. This is intended to result in increasing local involvement in developmental processes, especially in the process of rural development.

The emphasis (is) on "the role of and participation by the private sector." This is aimed at private sector involvement in structural improvements to the economy in terms of agricultural and industrial production, the development of power sources, and the acceleration of exports. The state shall review laws and regulations to reduce interference, and to facilitate the development of private businesses in accordance with the objectives of the Fifth Plan. The state shall support and encourage important business agencies or institutions in the private sector to participate in the resolution of the country's economic problems, as well as to share the government's responsibilities for national development.<sup>31</sup>

Another example which is indicative of attempts to decentralize political power is the Ministry of Interior's policy of a real decentralization of power to local areas and the regions, as manifested in the following statements:

... support the increased decentralization of power to local government units, with the objective of encouraging people in the localities to participate in local government and the development of their own localities;

... speed up local government efforts to improve their taxation, capabilities, and encourage the widespread utilization of taxation maps in assessing and collecting property and building taxes;

... encourage local government units to participate in the mobilization of resources and people's participation in their own localities, in support of government and police activities;

... support local government units in their public relations efforts aimed at making the people realize the importance and value of self-government in a democracy;

... accelerate the process of upgrading the administrative system and operations of the central and local governments to attain a greater degree of efficiency in alleviating people's hardships and resolving their problems. In particular, public services must be improved, in terms of speed and efficacy;

encourage the growth of provinces and districts so as to play a central role in administrative activities, and in the coordination of development planning based on the problems and needs of the people. Support the provinces to the extent that they become capable of alleviating problems resulting from sudden dangers and disasters, quickly and in time.<sup>32</sup>

Attempts to decentralize power have not been initiated solely by the Ministry of Interior. On May 20, 1983 a policy statement issued by the government stated that

the governmental system will be reformed so as to serve the people more efficiently. . . . In particular, government agencies will be reorganized so as to be more effective. Repetitiveness will be weeded out, and there will be a greater decentralization of power to the regions.

Local government will be encouraged. Local populations will be accorded more rights and capacities for self-government. The objective is to improve the efficacy of local government in local development for the benefit of the people, and in order to serve as a viable base for a democratic system of government.<sup>33</sup>

The above excerpts serve to support the thesis that Thailand has constantly attempted to adapt and find the most suitable course of action for itself. Although the country has always tended to exhibit a pattern of power centralization, it has nonetheless realized to a considerable degree the importance of decentralizing power. This is reflected in measures all geared towards decentralization of power. Ultimate success in terms of full decentralization, as manifested by a system of local self-government, and not just local government, may not be immediately attained. Nonetheless, partial fulfillment, in the form of administrative decentralization to the regions, is discernible. The pursuit of this objective on the part of the Ministry of Interior and government is apparent in many ways, such as:

- (1) Attempts to amend legislation so as to increase the powers of provincial governors. Such attempts must be approved by the Cabinet and announced in the Royal Gazette;
- (2) Improvements in the decentralization of financial power. These began under the Fourth Plan. Budgets have been allocated to each province under the control of the provincial governor. Utilization of funds is in accordance with provincial development plans, and is no longer dependent on approval from the central government.
- (3) Attempts to improve personnel administration. Provincial governors have been empowered to transfer and replace officials of C1-C5 rank, and participate in appraising the work of regional government agencies, with the objective of encouraging the decentralization of power on the part of ministries and departments other than the Ministry of Interior, to the benefit of provincial governors;
- (4) The delimitation of power in some respects, namely, investigative powers. The police must obtain permission from the provincial governor before making any arrest. This is in order to achieve a balance of power between

regional governments, the police, and the courts, in the interests of greater justice for all; and

(5) **Utilization of administrative mechanisms.** This refers to plans as the basis for the decentralization of power. Viewed from another standpoint, it is the utilization of projects as a tool in negotiating with the center. That is to say, previously all projects at the provincial level were initiated and controlled from the center. But the initiation of provincial plans involving one percent of the national budget<sup>34</sup> in 1979 during the premiership of Kriangsak Chomanan was tantamount to increasing the power of the provinces. This meant that the provinces were able to have a greater say as to which projects they wanted to be implemented, and to undertake such projects themselves. Later on, during the premiership of Prem Tinsulanonda, a national plan for the development of rural areas was drawn up by the provinces themselves. This plan was presented on July 25, 1981,<sup>35</sup> and constituted a series of regulations governing the administrative procedures pertaining to rural development. This case can be cited as an instance of power decentralization through the utilization of plans, which will lead to an even greater decentralization of power in the future.

#### **Factors Hindering the Decentralization of Power**

In the earlier sections, a number of reasons have been offered which account for the difficulty in implementing decentralization of power in Thailand. One reason mentioned was the interplay of historical factors encouraging centralization rather than decentralization. There were, however, attempts by successive governments and the Ministry of Interior to decentralize power, in particular the decentralization of power to the regions. Despite this, deeper analysis reveals that there are many other obstacles hindering the process of power decentralization in Thailand. From interviews conducted with, and observations of, academics and government officials, especially those in the Ministry of Interior, the obstacles and difficulties faced by those pursuing a greater decentralization of power may be set out as follows:

(1) There are legal problems arising from Revolutionary Council Decree Number 218, which underlies government administration today. This decree prevents delegation of power down the chain of command; it only permits delegation of powers from the highest level officials to their deputies and no further. Moreover, ministers can only receive orders appointing persons to whom power shall be delegated, which engenders a great many problems.

(2) There is a problem concerning people's awareness. Dr. Amara Raksataya<sup>36</sup> believes that "the Thai people on the whole do not want to understand the concept of self-government." They still want the government to do things for them, and are reluctant to help themselves. This belief is confirmed by the Undersecretary of Interior, who has said that "the decentrali-

zation of power is subject to budgetary constraints and the interest accorded it by the people."<sup>37</sup> That people are just not interested in the decentralization of power is reflected in the fact that government officials still have to guide the people in the rural areas towards the objective of local self-government, the designing of projects, or the simple expression of requirements. Thus, in many instances, we find that projects completed have not been in response to what people want. They have, rather, been in response to the demands of certain personalities like the village heads. What is worse, in some cases projects have been undertaken to benefit senior government officials, as for instance, in the building of tennis courts in impoverished areas, resulting in the district officer of the area being brought before an investigative committee.

(3) There is a belief that the present system is good enough as it is. From interviews conducted with senior officials in the Ministry of Interior, namely the Undersecretary, Directors General, Deputy Directors General, and advisers to the Ministry,<sup>38</sup> it was found that there was a great degree of consensus with regard to the administrative system today. There was a belief that the present system is perfectly adequate for the purpose of decentralization, whether it be the decentralization of power to the regions or to localities. What should be amended or improved are the processes of decentralization, or the performances of those units to which power is being decentralized. Thus, it was felt that outdated laws and regulations should be revised, the chain of command should be shortened in specific places, more taxes should be collected to finance the operations of government agencies, there should be greater autonomy in personnel management, etc. Because of this belief in the efficacy of the present system, no serious efforts are made to change it. When changes are proposed, they may not be necessarily feasible at the time. An example is that of increasing the incomes of local government units. A proposal was once made to economize by combining property and building taxes, to be collected once instead of twice. This was, however, rejected by the Ministry of Interior, which controls the country's taxation system.<sup>39</sup>

(4) There is a problem of distrust. The center, especially the Ministry of Interior, admits that there is still a need to retain control of the workings of local government units. The Ministry of Interior, for example, has the power to examine the finances of local government units.<sup>40</sup> The provincial governor and those appointed by him, viz., local government inspectors, can examine the financial statements of municipalities once a month. Furthermore, the Ministry of Interior appoints officials to inspect the finances of administrative agencies. In addition, the Committee for the Examination of National Finances inspects all expenditures of local government units. It should be noted, moreover, that budgetary procedures, procurement procedures, and inspection procedures are all controlled through regulations laid down by the central government. The reason for such control by the center is that many municipalities have proven to be completely incompetent and untrustworthy. Even though there have been some improvements, there is still a great deal of distrust of the



municipalities. Over and above this is the fact that the municipality form of administration is rather wasteful, necessitating expenditures on office buildings, wages and salaries, personnel, maintenance and other costs. The municipality system is more expensive than other systems such as the sanitation districts or provincial administration agencies, which pay smaller salaries than the municipalities because they are composed of government officials who already have a regular salary. Thus, the district officer as head of the sanitation district only receives about 3,000 baht a month. In short, municipalities have to pay more in salaries than do the sanitation districts of local government agencies. The latter two, moreover, have no expenses concerning office buildings, because they are located in the district offices. As municipalities cost more to operate, it is only natural that they should be more tightly controlled so as not to misappropriate funds. This tight control, however, may be one factor inhibiting the growth and development of the municipalities.

(5) There are values, views and beliefs of the power holders who believe that uniformity is good as it makes running the government easier.<sup>41</sup> Conversely, anything which is different is regarded as bad. Thus, it is believed that if there is complete decentralization, that is, administrators are elected, only gangsters and gamblers will be elected, because they are an influential group. It is believed that if ever elections are held to select provincial governors, it is the people from this group who will win. In contrast, there is a belief that provincial council members really constitute a council of building contractors, etc. As such views may not easily be corrected, they constitute a formidable obstacle to the decentralization of power. Another obstacle is the fact that administrators do not want to destroy the work of their predecessors, as this is self-defeating, especially as far as the benefits accruing to high level officials at the center are concerned. Examples include the power to transfer individuals who might thwart their own positions. This leads on to another undesirable situation—that of the indiscriminate exercise of bureaucratic power and authority.

(6) There is a problem of definition. Because the concept of decentralization of power cannot be precisely defined, and because Thai bureaucrats tend to equate the decentralization of power with the deconcentration thereof, or feel that power should be decentralized to the regions before further decentralization to the localities, this has led Likhit Teeravekin to observe that the point is being missed entirely. He emphasized that

there is talk of increasing discretionary powers of provincial governors in budgetary matters, and in drawing up of provincial plans. There is also talk of increasing the powers of district officers. At the same time, however, it is being forgotten that this all pertains to the regional level, which is an extension of the central government. Furthermore, at this level officials are for the most part not from the locality. As a result, the extent to which needs at the local level are being met is still problematic. To think in terms of an expansion of power and the greater freedom of regional government is probably due to the existence of a dilemma between the deconcentration of power and the real decentralization of power in terms of a devolution of power. The existence of the dilemma might be accounted for by the fact that officials responsible—in particular officials within the Ministry of Interior—probably do not

trust local governments with full powers of self-government. Hence, a way out has been sought, by according greater freedom to the "arms" and "legs" of the central government, on the premise that such a course is the best way out.<sup>42</sup>

(7) There is the problem of selecting the locus for the decentralization of power. Historical data indicate that in Thailand a lot of importance has been given to the royal city and the capital. Rama V, in particular, consolidated central government power in Bangkok after a period in which political power had been usurped to a great degree by a few families belonging to the nobility who dominated government service. This consolidation was achieved through the establishment of eleven ministries, and the institution of the *tesaapibaan* system in the regions under the control of the Ministry of Interior in Bangkok. Thus, when interest in the decentralization of power grew, it meant that decentralization would have to be from Bangkok out to the regions and localities. Such a process would take a considerable amount of time and would be hindered by those with vested interests in their own institutions which would lose power as a result of decentralization. Likhit Teeravekin accounts for this decentralization of power from the wrong locus as follows:

the problem faced by the country today is that too much emphasis has been placed on the capital city and activities at national level at the expense of smaller units in rural areas, in particular, the smallest units which are the villages and sub-districts. This has resulted in development projects leading to "rich harvests, thin people." Thus, if we are to lay the groundwork for democracy, and develop a viable socio-economic base, we must begin at the smallest units, namely the villages and especially the sub-districts. This is because the villages and in particular the sub-districts can be regarded as the cells constituting the Thai body politic. If these cells are weak rather than strong, the entire system is weakened as well. . . . Talk about decentralization should therefore not focus on the center insofar as there have been suggestions, for example, that provincial governors should be elected, or a number of provinces should be made responsible to an elected *khet* (area) or *paak* (regional) governor. What should be noted, rather, is that the provinces are like the most important parts of the body. They are, therefore, important and must be developed. But due to the scarcity of resources developmental emphasis should be focused on laying the proper groundwork and infrastructure, as stated above. To focus on increasing the autonomy of the provinces is analogous to focusing on running before walking.<sup>43</sup>

(8) There is a problem concerning high-level decision-makers. A problem frequently arising is that administrative committees are popular in Thailand. Every time the government changes, for instance, a committee on reform of the administrative system is always set up, composed of eight sub-committees.<sup>44</sup> One of these is always a sub-committee on the reform of regional and local government, whose task is to consider the decentralization of power. This sub-committee is empowered, furthermore, to set up working parties to consider specific aspects of local government. An example of this is the Working Party on Sanitation Districts. The membership of committees and sub-committees is generally made up of persons from three main areas, namely, academics, Ministry of Interior officials, and third parties composed of persons interested in change. The problem with committees and sub-committees is that they tend

to be dominated by Ministry of Interior officials. What is worse, many academics and administrators feel that the government is not really interested in amending and improving the law, especially Revolutionary Decree Number 218. Thus, for example, the topic of decentralization of power has been debated by many governments at various times over the past five to six years, but there have been no reforms as yet.

(9) There is a problem of being one nation. This has engendered a close control by the central government over local governments. The government through the Ministry of Interior treats the local government units such as the municipalities and sanitation districts as if the latter were agencies of the central and regional government, respectively. Apart from this, the fact that Thailand is one nation had led to the pursuit of a unity of command and overall unity, in the interest of greater national security. This is equivalent to automatically supporting a policy of centralization rather than decentralization, in order to attain such security. Furthermore, as Thailand is in what has been called "the development stage,"<sup>45</sup> there is a tendency for problems to be looked at in terms of what will be the outcome of given types of action; and of how can developmental efforts be accelerated. Such a viewpoint has resulted in policies of centralization, in the hope of achieving set objectives at the shortest time possible. Thus, the National Economic and Social Development Board, which was responsible for the Fifth National Plan, collated and screened the plans drawn up by different departments and divisions, before incorporating them into the plan.

(10) There is a question of central government sincerity in promoting local self-government. In a study made by Patom Manirojana for a doctoral thesis in 1978, it was observed that in spite of the fact that urban communities in Thailand have been expanding and growing in number, the Royal Thai Government has never been serious or enthusiastic in attempting to establish more autonomous urban governments or municipalities. The centralizing forces as featured by the Royal Thai Government's creation of new sanitary districts far outstripped the decentralizing force driving for the establishment of new municipalities. Over the last two decades, as the number of sanitary districts increased over eight times from 73 in 1955 to 695 in 1977, not one municipality has been established since 1957. Moreover, two large cities were consolidated into the core area of the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration. Actually, about 94 percent of all current municipalities were established before World War II. Since then, the urban population in the country has increased four-fold (from 1.73 million in 1974 to 7.34 million in 1976), but the number of urban governments has climbed to only 2.6 percent (from 117 in 1947 to 120 in 1976). It is obvious that for nearly 30 years, the Royal Thai Government has not seriously attempted to promote decentralization in this country.

### The Feasibility of Decentralizing Power in Thailand

That Thailand still has the opportunity and capability to decentralize power can be seen from the following summary of possible decentralizing procedures:

(1) *Administrative decentralization through the use of the administrative structure.* By this is meant spreading the work load and delegation of some powers, the exact form of which depends on individual projects, *khets* (areas), centers, and regions. As such, this entails no administrative autonomy; there is, rather, a greater freedom of action in some areas. An example is the greater freedom to undertake research which has been accorded the *khets*. Another example is the greater freedom accorded regional offices, for instance, the regional agricultural offices of the Ministry of Agriculture, which serve as starting points for initiating the decentralization of power. This is because the Ministry of Agriculture is attempting to create mini-ministries in order to shorten the chain of command, while at the same time giving more power to the regions.

(2) *Decentralization by power by administrative processes.* These consist of dispersion of activities, planning, decision-making powers dictated by budgetary constraints as determined by central government, and the use of budgetary planning. Such processes can be regarded as modes of decentralization, even though it is the provincial governors to whom power is being decentralized. This type of decentralization began towards the end of the Fourth National Plan, and was extended to the Fifth Plan, thus, demonstrating governmental propensities to accord greater powers to the regions. With respect to this form of decentralization, many senior officials in the Ministry of Interior hold the view that the decentralization of power in Thailand must first start in the regions, while at the same time allowing local governments greater opportunities for participation. Eventually, the decentralization of power will extend to local governments as well.

(3) *Decentralization of power through greater participation.* The target for greater participation here is the sub-district council, which lies at the lowest level of the Thai administrative structure. As regards participation by the sub-district council, it appears that there is a consensus among academics, politicians, and the Ministry of Interior that democratic principles must first be implanted through citizen participation at the grassroots level. This may be achieved through participation of locally prominent citizens in assessing projects and capital expenditures. The effect of such participation is to stimulate ideas and build up people's capabilities in the localities in preparation for eventual local self-government.

(4) *Decentralization of power through attempts at building an economic infrastructure at the local level.* The underlying objective is to increase people's material well-being at the local level, which will enable them to help themselves, thereby obviating the need for financial aid from the state. It seems that the provinces along the eastern seaboard are in the best position to realize this

economic infrastructure, because of their abundant resources and the fact that they have been targeted for massive financial inputs and industrial projects, such as the multi-billion baht soda ash project.

(5) *Decentralization of power through establishment of special forms of local self-government, which would eliminate problems resulting from concerns with national uniformity, and institutionalize freedom of action appropriate to given situations.* Examples of the latter are the Pattaya administrative system which is regarded as appropriate for Pattaya; and the Bangkok administrative system, which is regarded as appropriate for Bangkok. It is conceivable that in the future an administrative system specifically tailored to the needs of, say, Pakchong Municipality, will be set up. In sum, the population of each locality differs from each other in terms of topographical features, customs, and traditions. Thus, it is logical that administrative forms be developed to fit the particular needs of each community.

(6) *Decentralization of power through selection of provincial governors according to new criteria.* At present, provincial governors are appointed by the Ministry of Interior, and the vast majority are Ministry of Interior officials. Officials in other ministries have suggested that if by decentralization is meant that provincial governors will be given more powers, then the position of provincial governors should not be filled solely by Ministry of Interior officials. The rationale for this is that provincial governors exercise authority over all the officials in each province, irrespective of which ministry they come from; therefore it is only fair that officials of other ministries be allowed access to the governorship. In a different vein, there have been calls for the election of governors, which would entail a complete decentralization of power. On the other hand, there have been suggestions that governors be appointed by committees made up of officials from various ministries. Whatever the case may be, all these proposals have been forwarded with the aim of a decentralization of power in mind. What seems increasingly likely is that governors will come from not just the Ministry of Interior, but other government agencies as well.

### Conclusion

Decentralization of power in Thailand at present is a cross between deconcentration of power and true decentralization of power or devolution. The objective of the Government and Ministry of Interior is to use deconcentration as a stepping stone towards full decentralization of power. At present, the provincial governors have greater powers, both administratively and financially, than before. These powers are used in conjunction with plans and projects as the instruments of administration. It is the coherence inherent in this system which is of importance. Genuine efforts to decentralize power in

politics and government to the population at the grassroots level may be successful; but if there is no coherence, or if work is carried out on an *ad hoc* basis, then, success will be more difficult to attain. Should Thailand still attempt to pursue the decentralization of power in the form of both deconcentration and devolution of political power to the regions and localities as originally intended; and should there be coherent and sincere attempts to do so, while at the same time enabling all sectors of the population to participate, it is certain that in time the decentralization of both administrative and political power along Western lines will be achieved.

Finally, it should be noted that whether decentralization of power will take place in Thailand—and if so, to what extent—must ultimately depend on those who wield political power in the country. It is up to this group to decide on the necessity for and appropriateness of the decentralization of power to the people. Decentralization is a complex process which cannot be achieved overnight, but if the Thai people are unanimous in their desire for decentralization, its eventual realization seems certain. It should be noted, in the final analysis, that even though Thailand has been the object of criticism and scepticism from many quarters, it has nonetheless managed to survive as a viable political entity over the centuries. Thus, Thais may talk of coups d'etat without any apprehension: coups bring with them new governments, some of which are popular, and some not. What is uppermost in people's minds, however, is that the nation survives. Although people may complain of the suffering engendered by their environment, it must still be said, to be fair, that the Thais live reasonably well, even though theirs is not the best of all possible worlds. Nevertheless, water still flows; electricity is available; communications are generally good; there is sufficient food for everyone. Indeed, Thailand is in a position to provide for its less fortunate neighbours, such as the Khmers. The Thais have never starved: what more is there to say?

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Thailand became a national entity in 1257, with Sukhothai as the royal city.

<sup>2</sup> Somdej Krom Phraya Damrong Rajanupharb, *Laksana Kaanpokkrong Prathet Sayaam Nae Boraan. (The Traditional System of Government in Siam)*, printed on the occasion of the royally-sponsored cremation of Nai Dao Bupaves, December 1, 1968.

<sup>3</sup> Data compiled by the Library and Information Center, National Institute of Development Administration, 1983; cf. Appendix 1.

<sup>4</sup> Harin Hongsakul, "Kratoh Pluak Kaanmuang Thai," ("Cracking Open the Shell of Thai Politics"), address delivered to the Political Science Alumni Association, Chulalongkorn University, at the Hyatt Central Hotel, August 18, 1983. See also Appendix 2.

<sup>5</sup> Likhit Teeravekin, *Kaankrajai Amnaaj Lae Kaanmuusuanruam Nai Kaanpatanaa Chonabot. (The Decentralization of Power and Participation in the Development of Rural Areas)*, Research Institute of the Thai Universities Research Association, together with Frederick Ebert Stiftung, November 1982, page 49.

<sup>6</sup>The Royal Decree on Sanitation Districts, Bangkok, Ratanakosin Era 116. *Annual Legal Proceedings*.

<sup>7</sup>Lieutenant Sathien Vichailaksana and Police Colonel Suebwongse Vichailaksana, *Prakaas Kana Pathiwat Chabab Tii 218 Rueng Rabiab Borimaan Rachakaan Paendin*. (Revolutionary Council Decree Number 218 on National Administration Regulations). (Niitivech, in front of the Grand Palace, Bangkok Metropolis, 1980), page 23.

<sup>8</sup>\_\_\_\_\_, *Pharachapanyat Pokkrong Tongtii Por. Sor. 2457*. (Local Government Act, 1914). (Phranakorn Press, 1971); and the First Royal Decree on Sanitation Districts, Ratanakosin Era 166, in *Annual Legal Proceedings*.

<sup>9</sup>Krerkkiat Pipatseritham, *Kaanklang Tongtin Lae Kaakrajai Aannaat Kaanklang Nai Prathet Thai*. (Local Finances and the Decentralization of Financial Power in Thailand). Duangkamol Press, Ltd., together with The Economics Association, Thammasat University, Thammasat University Press, Bangkok, 1979), page 144.

<sup>10</sup>Department of Local Administration, Ministry of Interior, *Saaraanukrom Kiawkub Kaanpokkrong*. (*Encyclopedia of Government*). Printed to commemorate the Kathin ceremony at Samuhapradithaaraan Temple on Saturday, 30 October 1982. Local Government Press, Bangkok.

<sup>11</sup>Banjong Choosakulchaat, *Kaanpathiroop Rabob Borihan Rajakaan Paendin Puea Kaanpokkrong Raborb Prachaathipatai Un Mii Phramahaakasat Pen Pramook*. (*Reform of the Administrative System for a Democratic System of Government With a King as Sovereign*). (Personal Research Document), 1976-1977.

<sup>12</sup>*Encyclopedia of Government, op. cit.*, p. 190.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 120-121.

<sup>14</sup>From an interview with Professor Dr. Chakrit Noranitipadungkarn, June 6, 1983.

<sup>15</sup>John G. Clarke, *Outline of Local Government of the United Kingdom* (London: Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, Ltd., 1957), pp. 1-3.

<sup>16</sup>Prataan Kongritsueksakorn, *Truesadai Kaanpokkrong Tongtin*. (*The Theory of Local Government*). Study Sheet in Public Administration No. 34, pp. 7-9.

<sup>17</sup>United Nations, *Decentralization for National and Local Development* (N.Y.: United Nations Publication, Sale No. 62 II H), p. 3.

<sup>18</sup>Krerkkiat, *op. cit.*, pp. 158-222.

<sup>19</sup>*Saaraanukrom Kiawkub Kaanpokkrong, op. cit.*, (*Encyclopedia of Government*), pp. 175, 200-201; and cf. Suthat Sirisuay, Thesis for the M.A. in Public Administration, Thammasat University, on *Pharajakonraneeyakit Kong Pawkhun Ramkamaeng Nai Kaankohtang Sathaaban Kaanpokkrong Kong Chaat Thai*. (*The Role of King Ramkamaeng in Founding the Governmental Institutions of the Thai Nation*), 1965 and Anant Chaengkleeb, Thesis for the M.A. in Political Science, Thammasat University, on *Kaanplianplaeng Raborb Kaanpokkrong Kong Prathet*. (*Transformations of the National Governmental System*), 1969.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>21</sup>*Pharajadumras Nai Phrabaatsomdej Phrachulachomkiao Chaoyuuha*. (Speeches of King Rama V), in which the king explains his national governmental reforms. Booklet printed in memory of Naang Pakdii Srisupanabhumi (Pim Sunthornsaratoon), 1963, pp. 1-10.

<sup>22</sup>*Saaraanukrom Kiawkub Kaanpokkrong, op. cit.*, p. 103. Cf. Appendix 2 on *tesaapibaans*.

<sup>23</sup>*Pharajadumras* . . . , *op. cit.*, cf. Appendix 2 also.

<sup>24</sup>From interviews with Dr. Tinabhandy Nakata and Dr. Patom Manirojana, May 23, 1983 and August 1983, respectively.

<sup>25</sup> Likhit, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-10; and *Centralization and Decentralization: The Dilemma of Thailand*, Faculty of Political Science, Thammasat University, Bangkok, Thailand.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Kanakamakaan Patiroop Rabob Rachakaan Lae Rabiab Borihaan Rachakaan Paendin* (Committee on the Reform of the Administrative System and National Administrative Regulations) (Office of the Prime Minister, Printing Press, 1982), Introduction, page c.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. d-e.

<sup>29</sup> Fifth National Economic and Social Development Plan, 1982-1986, p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>31</sup> Ministry of Interior, *Kam Talaeng Nayobai Krasuang Mahaadthai*. (Policies of the Ministry of Interior), 1983.

<sup>32</sup> Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda and the Cabinet. Presentation of policies to Parliament, May 20, 1983, pp. 303-304.

<sup>33</sup> From an interview with Professor Chakrit Noranitipadungkarn, June 6, 1983.

<sup>34</sup> *Paen Patanaa Chonabot Haeng Chaat*. (National Plan for the Development of Rural Areas), Office of the Prime Minister, 1981.

<sup>35</sup> From an interview with Professor Amara Raksasataya on May 24, 1983.

<sup>36</sup> From an interview with the Undersecretary of the Ministry of Interior, June 1, 1983.

<sup>37</sup> From interviews with senior officials of the Ministry of Interior, as follows: the Undersecretary, the Director General of the Department of Local Administration; the Deputy Director General of the Department of Local Administration; the Deputy Director General of the Department of Accelerated Rural Development; and advisers to the Ministry, June 1, June 2, June 9, and June 3, respectively.

<sup>38</sup> From interviews with advisers to the Ministry of Interior, June 9, 1983.

<sup>39</sup> Krerkkiat, *op. cit.*, p. 271.

<sup>40</sup> From an interview with Professor Kasem Suwannakul, June 2, 1983.

<sup>41</sup> Likhit, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Kanakamakaan Patiroop* . . . , *op. cit.*

<sup>44</sup> From an interview with Dr. Chakrit, June 6, 1983.