

Agents of Bureaucratic Polity in Modern Thailand: Focusing on the Training of Bureaucrats and Military Officers

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Abstract

This paper is a consideration of the relations among elites in modern Thailand, conducted through examining the aspects of the hiring and training of bureaucrats and military officers. Bureaucrats were frequently hired via connections, with the examinations conducted at one point failing to take hold. In contrast, the Army established a system of schooling for training early on. This enabled military officers to feel a sense of superiority and self-confidence in relation to other groups, and heightened their group cohesion. This sense of superiority and high cohesion are thought to have been factors in the formation of the structure placing military officers in superior positions.

Keywords : military officers, bureaucrats, civil service examinations, connections, merit system

1. Introduction

In the modernization of less developed countries, the role of the government is considered to be highly significant. At the initial stage, the necessary preconditions for economic take-off can be created as a policy by the government⁽¹⁾. This is why modernization begins from the top down. Therefore, the public sector is initially prioritized over the private sector, and the latter is protected by the former as development proceeds. To put it schematically, modernization and the promotion of the public sector begin and proceed in a parallel manner and the private sector is formed thereafter. Then, the distance between the two gradually diminishes.

This perspective emphasizes the roles of those working in the public sector, specifically modern bureaucrats, in less developed countries. Because the practical working and planning of the government tends to be led by bureaucrats, the actions of civil servants and military officers directly affect politics, economics, and society.

This paper discusses the hiring and training of bureaucrats and military officers in late 19th and early 20th-century Thailand, thus examining relations among

the elite.

How, then, were modern bureaucrats selected? Generally, less developed countries tend to hire by diploma⁽²⁾. The tendency is to select personnel based on “accomplishments” such as academic performance and educational background. Thailand, the focus of this paper, is categorized as a less developed area; it is therefore important to examine how bureaucrats and military officers were hired and trained, and how this process affected their relationships.

Bureaucratic polity in Thailand has been examined in the past. It has been pointed out that the military, as the most organized and cohesive group among government organizations, has consistently been in conflict with the bureaucracy⁽³⁾. Discussion also included the argument that through powerful officers, military elements have become a part of the government and its bureaucratic mechanisms⁽⁴⁾. However, discussion of the relations between the bureaucracy and the military has not sufficiently addressed the perspective of the hiring and training of bureaucrats and officers.

This paper begins by discussing the conflict over civil service employment examinations in modern Thailand. Next, it analyzes the aspect of training of military officers. Thereupon, the paper considers the

relations between bureaucrats and officers.

2. Training of civil servants

2-1. *The Chakri Reformation period*

Many Southeast Asian countries were colonized by the West and gained independence after World War II; Thailand, which remained independent throughout, is the exception. Colonized countries fall under the governance of laws made by the colonizer, but Thailand developed its own legal system⁽⁵⁾.

Thailand is said to have opened to the outside world upon signing the Bowring Treaty with the United Kingdom in 1855, in response to “western impact.” Modernization proceeded in accordance with the Chakri Reformation, which began at this time in the mid-19th century⁽⁶⁾. Along with this, the country was urged to create a modern bureaucrat class to replace the traditional one. King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) stated the following in 1885:

Once, the King received nothing in the way of documents but a few reports and ledgers. While the amount of documents increased in the Fourth King’s reign, it was not as great as it is today. Today, any would-be bureaucrat who cannot read and write is useless. At this time, there are still bureaucrats who cannot read or write⁽⁷⁾.

Momentum was building for the quality of bureaucrats to be improved, a step essential to the management of a modern nation. As the duties of administrative institutions ballooned, so did the records of the policy-making process and the results of the work. However, not all bureaucrats were able to keep up with these changes. The king attempted governance not by custom and tradition but by legal regulations and functional institutions. Through bureaucratic reforms, he attempted to control the mechanisms of administration⁽⁸⁾.

Full-scale administrative reform began in 1892. The king planned and issued an order for complete reform of the administrative organization. Domestic governance functions were thus centralized in the newly established Ministry of Internal Affairs, and authority over financial administration in the Ministry of Finance, stripping discretionary power from various other ministries and agencies. Furthermore, military

functions were centralized in the Ministry of Defense, and legal functions in the Ministry of Justice.

Notable among the reforms was the establishment of the Ministries of Internal Affairs and Finance, aimed at weakening the powerful nobility who dominated the provinces⁽⁹⁾. The modernization of less developed countries thus leans toward centralization of authority. In addition, the hiring of bureaucrats at the time was based on attribute standards, and largely depended on the king’s personal preference⁽¹⁰⁾.

In parallel with the organization of the bureaucracy, institutions for the training of bureaucrats arose one after the other from the end of the 19th century. In 1897, Prince Ratchaburi, the Minister of Justice, established a law school in order to train judicial bureaucrats, becoming the principal himself. A son of King Chulalongkorn, he was an Oxford-educated jurist and was keenly aware, as Justice Minister, of the lack of capable judicial officers. The law school established within the Ministry was intended to resolve this issue⁽¹¹⁾. Five years later, Prince Damrong, the Minister of Internal Affairs, took the lead in establishing a school for the training of Internal Affairs officers. The school, renamed the Civil Service College in 1911, also began to handle the training of bureaucrats for other ministries. In 1917, it became Chulalongkorn University, the first university in Thailand⁽¹²⁾.

As the domestic training system took shape, students were also dispatched abroad, mainly to Europe and the United States. Overseas study became formalized in the reign of Chulalongkorn, “in order to cultivate human resources able to take a position of leadership in the advancement of modernization.”⁽¹³⁾ To support his own governance, the king particularly encouraged young royals to study abroad in the pursuit of knowledge and skills. Prince Ratchaburi, mentioned above, was one of such royals. Less developed countries have been inevitably compelled to refer to the political, economic, and social systems of the West.

Study funded by the state took various forms; for instance, the Royal Scholarships instituted in March 1898, or the scholarships provided by various levels of the ministries and bureaus. State-funded overseas scholars numbered 206 in King Chulalongkorn’s reign⁽¹⁴⁾, and reached 303 in 1923 alone, during King Vajiravudh’s reign. Obviously, there were also privately funded scholars.

As the systematization of training proceeded,

the young class of would-be bureaucrats expanded. Through the Chakri Reformation, work as a bureaucrat became an objective and target of ambition for Thais as never before. The prospect of reaching a high bureaucratic rank appeared, leading a larger class to aim for the career of bureaucrats from 1890⁽¹⁵⁾.

The foundations of the systems were laid and many young men came to be drawn to the bureaucracy; however, that did not mean that the doors thereto were in fact thrown wide. Administration continued to proceed within each ministry on the basis of patron-client relationships between high officials and their personal subordinates. Although the system had taken on modern and functional characteristics, these remained only at the surface level. Therefore, there was no change in the patron-client relationships on which behavioral norms were based⁽¹⁶⁾. Hiring was treated similarly. Although a training system had been organized, little progress was made in moving away from the basis of personal relations.

2.2. Introduction of examination-based hiring and its setbacks

Competitive hiring examinations were introduced to certain governmental organizations during King Vajiravudh's reign. However, because the heads of organizations held the right to hire, national examinations were difficult to implement. The chief administrators were fiercely resistant to the decrease in their power and influence that would result from a change in the administrative personnel system based on patron-client relationships with the introduction of a merit-based system⁽¹⁷⁾.

In 1910, King Chulalongkorn died; his successor, King Vajiravudh (Rama VI) remained on the throne until 1925. Although he was able to push through various successful reforms, the state of financial administration worsened due to *laissez-faire* policies. Likewise, the king antagonized the military by creating a paramilitary boy scout organization. He was also lacking in administrative motivation, neglecting his duties while playing at being a military officer and dabbling in literature⁽¹⁸⁾. It was not only, as stated above, because chief administrators lacked motivation that overall governmental exams were not adopted; above all, it was due to the king's own failure to become actively involved in administration.

Upon Vajiravudh's death in November 1925, his

younger brother King Prajadhipok (Rama VII) took the throne. Immediately upon his accession, the new king formed a Supreme Council composed of royalty such as Prince Damrong, promoting financial rebuilding and administrative reform through these royal "elders."⁽¹⁹⁾ The possibility of exam hiring for bureaucrats was also discussed at the Council, with the Prince taking responsibility.

On October 23, 1926, Prince Damrong submitted a personal proposal for civil service regulations to the king. The proposal included the possibility of bureaucratic hiring examinations, but its lack of thoroughness disqualified it as an open and unified competitive exam system.

Aware of the need to establish civil service regulations, the king was dissatisfied with the proposal. Given the limited positions available in comparison to the high rate of applicants for the bureaucracy, he intended to provide opportunities to highly learned applicants through fair and neutral hiring⁽²⁰⁾. As of the early 1920s, there were some 11,000 students in secondary education, with many would-be bureaucrats among them⁽²¹⁾.

Prince Damrong's lack of enthusiasm derived from concerns that ethnic Chinese without distinguished backgrounds would enter the bureaucracy in the case of thorough competitive examinations. In response thereto, the king called forcefully for the introduction of examinations, arguing that fulfilling the four qualifications for application as a bureaucrat would be sufficient. The four qualifications consisted of holding Siamese (Thai) nationality, being at least eighteen years of age, being in good physical health with no bad reputation, and having a certain level of education⁽²²⁾. The king felt that it would be more beneficial to assimilate the ethnic Chinese than to exclude them⁽²³⁾.

The king's insistence on competitive examinations was largely due to advice from his foreign advisors. He received memoranda from the US diplomatic advisor Raymond Stevens on December 13, 1926, and the British financial advisor Edward Coke on November 30.

According to Stevens, the US adopted open competitive examinations for civil service hiring, although there was still an ingrained system of patronage due to politics. In short, party supporters demanded civil service positions in return for election support, and party leaders were unable to turn them down. With this in mind, he felt that in Thailand,

where there was no party system, there would be little resistance to the introduction of a merit-based system. Coke also argued that there would be relatively little opposition to the system in Thailand because the country lacked a “class of professional politicians” like that of the United Kingdom⁽²⁴⁾.

Thereafter, over two years or so, the difference of opinions between the pro-examination king and anti-examination faction of Prince Damrong came gradually to the surface, with adjustments being worked out. This situation was a sign of the rapidly declining leadership of the king, as the class of young, educated would-be bureaucrats grew sharply in number⁽²⁵⁾.

On September 8, 1928, the Civil Service Regulations Bill was submitted to the king. Revised according to his comments, it was passed into law on February 23, 1929. Based on this law, the government implemented three centralized examinations in 1929, 1930, and 1933.

On April 24, 1934, the Civil Service Regulations Act, B.E. (Buddhist calendar) 2476 came into force, and the previous law of five years was abolished. The new law laid down thorough rules for competitive examinations. Examinations became mandatory not only for new hires but also for hiring and promotion at the group and section chief levels. Furthermore, governmentally funded students abroad intending to become bureaucrats would have their funding cut off if they did not take exams.

However, the Civil Service Regulations Act, B.E. 2479, passed on December 27, 1936, weakened the examinations' competitive nature and stringency, reviving patronage-based hiring. Although the law was revised several times after that year, its principles remained in force until 1971⁽²⁶⁾.

Thus, from the late 1930s, three parallel groups of bureaucrats took shape: those hired before the Civil Service Regulations Act of 1929; those hired during the competitive examination period from 1929 to 1936; and those hired during the resurgent patronage era from 1936.

3. Background of military officers

3-1. Hiring and training

In less developed countries, the military functions as one of the most modernized public organizations⁽²⁷⁾. The military is centered on the modern rational system; through participation therein, people learn

modern universalist behavior patterns and acquire qualifications in their military careers as part of the leadership elite, regardless of their origins. In many countries, for the non-privileged classes and those with social backgrounds in farming villages and the like, a military career is a major path to positions of leadership or responsibility. In other words, military schooling provides the most effective path to upward social mobility.

The modernization of the Thai military began in 1887. In April of that year, a military commander was established, aiming to unify the previously independent troops. In August, the Military Academy was founded in order to train officers. It was, however, notably insufficient to its task.

In 1893, Thailand was defeated in a clash with French forces known as the Paknam Incident. The Thai leaders thus became aware that their military was severely underdeveloped. After this incident, King Chulalongkorn launched a project for further modernization of the military, including the establishment of several military institutions and the introduction of a draft⁽²⁸⁾. The project also included a more thorough approach to the Military Academy.

Established in 1887, for its first decade the Military Academy admitted only the sons of the royal family, bureaucrats, and officers, refusing admission to commoners. However, at the turn of the 20th century, the path to officers' positions began to widen⁽²⁹⁾.

At the time, the Military Academy was composed of a three-year preparatory course and a three-year main course, with entrance to the former mainly for primary school graduates and to the latter for secondary school graduates. In order to maintain control of the military as its scale expanded, the Academy's entrance qualifications were changed in 1906: preparatory applicants were restricted to the children of the upper class and required recommendations from high-ranking officials⁽³⁰⁾.

Plaek Phibunsongkhram, who would later become Prime Minister, entered the Military Academy preparatory course in 1909 as a primary school graduate, thanks to his father's successful efforts to obtain a recommendation from a powerful bureaucrat. Although there was no entrance exam for the preparatory course, which admitted officers' sons based on connections, entrants to the main course were required to pass an exam. Phibunsongkhram and those

of his classmates who went on to the main course took the exam in 1912; of the 176 examinees, only 10 were successful⁽³¹⁾. The greater openness of the exam led to increased competitiveness.

Phibunsongkhram graduated from the Academy in 1915, ranked 12th among 60 classmates. At the time, those with higher grades tended to be assigned to regiments closer to Bangkok, and those with lower grades were sent out to the provinces. Though he had wanted to work in the capital, because higher-ranked classmates dominated the coveted assignments to Bangkok and its suburbs, Phibunsongkhram was assigned to duty with the Phitsanulok division⁽³²⁾. The Army had come to emphasize “accomplishments” in the form of final grades at the Military Academy.

In 1903, the Army assigned promising young officers to the Army General Staff Department for staff officer education. The three-year on-the-job training program produced ten staff officers. This was the beginning of staff officer training in Thailand.

However, its methods were considered insufficient, and in April 1909, the Command and General Staff College was founded. The mission of the College at that time was “to train selected officers of all components of the Army on staff techniques.” Thereafter, the Army became keenly aware of the importance of staff assistance, gradually developing the College further.

In 1919, ten years later, the Army General Staff Department was split into five sections, and the College was renewed as one of them. Educational standards were enhanced, with more stringent demands made of the student officers. The College’s prestige thus continued to rise, with graduates beginning to receive diplomas in 1928 and being permitted to wear Command and General Staff College badges⁽³³⁾. Officers with the College on their records were assigned to major central posts.

In April 1921, Phibunsongkhram passed the College entrance examination and entered the fast track to success. At the time, the College had just been reorganized, with classes taught through a process of trial and error and no textbooks. Instructors fresh from studying abroad read from textbooks in foreign languages, which the students had to copy. Two years later, Phibunsongkhram graduated first in his class, receiving a governmental scholarship to study in France⁽³⁴⁾. Educational background as a College graduate and final grades served as the criteria for

personnel assignments within the Army.

However, as of 1910, the generals and lieutenant generals were restricted to members of the royal family alone; of 13 major generals, 6 were royals, as were more than half the division commanders. Most of these general officers were extremely young⁽³⁵⁾. Royal birth remained the highest privilege within Thailand.

The formidable barrier between royals and others gradually became the target of more and more doubts and dissatisfaction. These came from the increasing number of non-royal bureaucrats and officers as educational opportunities expanded⁽³⁶⁾. Thus, cracks appeared between the nobility and those with career accomplishments, leading to opposition. In 1932, the People’s Party led a revolution and toppled the absolute monarchy. The party officials were gifted officers with experience in Europe, who were dissatisfied with the Army leadership and its domination by hapless royals and their cronies⁽³⁷⁾.

3-2. Characteristics of Army officers

This section addresses the characteristics of officers in the Thai Army. While it is difficult to grasp the picture overall, an outline of the relevant characteristics is possible. Here the focus is on officers who were members of the National Administrative Reform Assembly from 1976 to 1977, or the National Legislative Assembly or Senate from 1979 to 1983. The analysis therefore addresses the particular subgroup of “politicized officers,” indicating at least one aspect of the officers’ characteristics. The analysis covers 58 officers born between 1912 and 1921 (Period I), 81 born between 1922 and 1931 (Period II), and 43 born between 1932 and 1941 (Period III)⁽³⁸⁾.

With regard to origins, the four regions of Samut Prakan, Phra Nakhon, Nonthaburi, and Thonburi are considered the “capital regions.” Of the 58 officers in Period I, 29 were from the capital region, as were 41 of the 81 officers in Period II, amounting to about half of the total. Of the 43 officers in Period III, 26 (60.5%) were from the capital region, a slightly higher ratio. This suggests that many military officers hailed from Thailand’s centrally important areas.

For purposes of comparison, let us consider the bureaucrats in the Ministry of Agriculture in 1940, some of whom overlap with the Period I military officers. Of 1866 civil servants, 42.2% were from the capital region; among the 496 of the third rank or

higher, equivalent to newly hired university graduates, the rate was 53.2%, and among the 168 of the second rank or higher, equivalent to section heads, it was 61.9%. Notably, the higher the rank, the higher the ratio of people from the capital region. At the same time, it is also notable that in terms of the geographical recruitment base, there was no significant difference from that of military officers⁽³⁹⁾.

Next, let us examine studying abroad. Of the officers in Period I, 84.5% had experience studying overseas. The ratio fell to 69.1% in Period II and 53.5% in Period III. As in the experience of Phibunsongkhram, who qualified to study in France by graduating first in his class at the Command and General Staff College, studying abroad was at one time a path for the elite. However, this condition gradually ceased to apply.

As modernization proceeded and the Army's educational system fell into place, Thailand acquired the capacity to train its officers without relying heavily on foreign countries. In a different sense of studying abroad, even those whose brilliance led them to leave the Military Academy and study at West Point in the United States found themselves at a disadvantage in career terms⁽⁴⁰⁾. Graduating from the Military Academy and then doing well in officer training or at the College was considered more significant. Military careers were made or broken by the clear-cut results of educational background and performance.

4. Conclusion

Over the four decades from 1932, Thai politics were often described as "bureaucratic policy." For example, of the 237 ministers of state from 1932 to 1958, there were 100 civil servants and 84 military officers⁽⁴¹⁾.

However, the actual political power was in the hands of the military elite, so that the term "military policy" seems more appropriate⁽⁴²⁾. The bureaucracy did not possess political power comparable to that of the military. "Typically, in Thailand, civil servants would never disagree with soldiers to their faces. The many bureaucrats mingling with military elites in the high official posts were not there because of their strong influence on the military; if anything, for the military elite to effectively control the bureaucracy essential to governance, it was convenient for them to employ professional bureaucrats rather than officers unfamiliar with the duties of the Ministries⁽⁴³⁾."

There are multiple factors that enabled the military's grasp on power. The explanation presented here relies on the perspectives of hiring and training. Bureaucrats tended to be hired via connections, with the examination system slow to take root. There were also various institutions for the training of bureaucrats; of these, Chulalongkorn University was not established until 1917.

In contrast, although the hiring and promotion of military officers originally privileged the upper classes as well, the creation of a school system enabled the merit system to make progress, with an increasing tendency to rely on educational background and performance. This led to the following characteristics on the part of military officers, here presented as a hypothesis.

First, the development of a sense of superiority and self-confidence compared to other groups. This was presumably enhanced by having been selected on merit, rather than family background or connections. Second, group cohesion. As emphasis came to rest on the educational background of graduation from the Military Academy, the officers became a group of alumni, with the high achievers from the Academy and the College at its core.

This high self-awareness and cohesion are thought to have become factors in the formation of the structure placing the Army above the bureaucrats. This view calls for future verification through more detailed empirical analysis.

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