

Authoritarianism in Thai Higher Education: The Threats Against Academic Freedom and Productivity

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Abstract—This article seeks to highlight the most critical issues affecting the academic freedom of Thai academics. The issues have long plagued the productivity of Thai higher education sector. This article will argue that the threat to the academic freedom in Thai universities are not necessarily limited to the outside force or the government, but from the internal factors. It drew on data from laws and regulations, government publications, and academic articles to analyse the situation of the academic authoritarianism in Thailand. The article concurred with Southall and Cobbing [2] and Lao [3] that the accountability system and managerialism has adversely been affecting the nature of academic work. The authoritarianism has been manifested through the prescription of the strict regulations for higher education institutions. After the great economic collapse in 1997, Thai higher education subjected itself to reform and restructure. However, the transformation does not address the nature of ineffective bureaucratic system which pervaded the higher education domain. While the management effectiveness has not been improved. Academics have been experiencing unrealistic expectation in teaching, research publication output, administrative tasks, and multiple quality assurance processes. This leads to demoralization of teaching and research staff and lower outcome of student quality.

Keywords—Academic Freedom; Autonomous Universities; Thailand Higher Education

I. INTRODUCTION

It is a controversial issue that universities need to adapt to changes either internal and external. The conventional concept of higher education is identified by the Humboldtian model of higher education which was rooted in the 19th century. It emphasizes “the unity of teaching and research, the pursuit of higher learning in the philosophy faculty, freedom of study for students” [1]. The model was adopted by the American higher education institutions. According to the Humboldtian model, academic freedom is an important element in higher education. Academics are required to pursue the inquiry of knowledge in their field with little or no intervention from the state. The Humboldtian model is presented in Thai universities as they took the university model from the United States.

The article argues that academic authoritarianism is destroying the academic freedom and productivity of higher

education. It will also argue that the cultural framework of Thailand contributes to academic authoritarianism. The author cited Southall and Cobbing [2] to illustrate the downfall of the managerialism in higher education in South Africa. In Thailand, autonomy of Thai higher education is placed upon the concept of academic freedom and effectiveness in administration and management. However, the downfall of autonomy is also widespread. Lao [3] criticized the autonomy system of university that it prioritizes research publication and international ranking over its true mission of a “higher learning” institution.

After the great economic crisis in 1997, Thai public organizations were subjected to the changes due to the economic instability. The aftermath of the crisis led to education reform to respond to the needs of the globalization. The academic authoritarian leads to the culture of managerialism and accountability. Universities were advocated to go autonomous which is to be able to manage their resources with little or no government control. This was enacted in the Section 36 of the 1999 National Education Act which defines that universities are able to establish the system of system of administration and management as well as having flexibility in operation and academic freedom.

Academic authoritarian leads to the culture of managerialism and accountability. The greater need from the public is depicted in the National Education Act of 1999 and 2002. Universities went through the reform and restructure process. They are socially expected to have greater accountability towards the society. Academic authoritarianism is partially stemmed from the imbalance of power. The autonomous institutions gain the freedom of management monitored by the council. However, it was acknowledged that the freedom is not generally granted to the academic staff. While the interests of stakeholders are becoming more importance to the council and executives of the universities, the collegiate nature of the institutions is being devalued.

II. HIGHER EDUCATION REFORM IN THAILAND

After the 1997 Asian Economic Crisis, Thailand was adversely affected due to many factors e.g. low cash reserve.

The country announced the currency floating and went into the state of bankruptcy. Thailand received the 17.2 billion Dollar rescue package support program from the IMF and 500 million Dollar Social Sector Program loan from the ADB during 1997-1998. The implications of the loan packages were that the public sectors went through the reform and restructuring [4-5]. Higher education was reformed. The administrative aspect of the reform changed the conventional bureaucratic system of higher education into autonomous universities. The reform focused on improving quality of teaching and learning and the administrative effectiveness [6].

Following the crisis, Thailand witnessed a loss its balance and identity. The technocrats and policy makers stated to be sceptical about globalization [7]. Thailand reconsider whether globalization is “a blessing.” Globalization can generally be regarded the forces that permeate nations from outside. Globalization is defined a state “that the world is rapidly being moulded into a shared social space by economic and technological forces and that developments in one region of the world can have profound consequences for the life chances of individuals or communities on the other side of the globe” [8 p.1]. While globalization can affect the nation at the macro level, it also comes in form of social and cultural forces that influence the local community. It denotes the increasing convergence and interdependence among nations as well as interconnectedness in synergies in economic, social, and cultural domains [9]. In higher education, globalization introduce the changes to universities in multiple ways.

Levin [10] identifies 12 aspects of globalization that have affected higher education institutions:

1. Internationalization (students, curriculum, delivery);
2. Public sector funding constraint;
3. Private sector interaction;
4. Electronic technology, real-time communication;
5. Productivity and efficiency;
6. External competition;
7. Restructuring;
8. Labor alterations (e.g., additional work);
9. State intervention;
10. Partnerships;
11. Workforce training;
12. Commodification [10 p. 383]

Commodification element of globalization of higher education is represented as the objectification of practice including routinized work, standardized practices of education delivery and objectifying curriculum reducing it to the basic elements [10 p. 240].

A. The case of autonomous universities

OECD (11) identifies autonomy as “the level of capability and the right of an institution to decide its own course of action pertaining to institution policy, planning financial and staff management, compensation, students and academic freedom, without the interference of outside authority” [11 p.

471]. This definition of autonomy covers four areas of (1) academic freedom, (2) budget or funding implications, staff management, and (4) quality supervision. Autonomy of higher education is defined by Pandey [11 p. 471] as the privilege and the capacity of an institution to act by its own choices in pursuit of its mission and goals. This includes institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and financial autonomy. While, if we look at the 1999 National Education Act, autonomy is defined as having certain level of freedom in administration and management and in academic affairs under the supervision of the council of the institutions. Section 36 of the 1999 National Education Act defines that:

“State institutions which provide education at the degree level shall be legal entities and enjoy the status of government or state-supervised agencies. These institutions shall enjoy autonomy; be able to develop their own system of administration and management; have flexibility and academic freedom, and be under the supervision of the councils of the institutions in accord with the foundation acts of the respective institutions (Section 36).” [11 p. 471]

After 1999 National Education Act promulgation, higher education institutions were advocated to become autonomous. It was proposed that autonomy would be a panacea to the issues of graduate quality, resource management and bureaucratic administration. Many cases were reported elsewhere. Levin [10] maintains that the US and Canada Government has attempted to introduce the policies that change the modus operandi of community colleges to align with the economic goals by emphasizing the workforce training and economic competitiveness. Colleges were obliged to improve their management system to be more efficient and increase their productivity and accountability. This marked the paradigm shift of higher education as a place for knowledge dissemination and production to profitable and market-oriented model. Knowledge is viewed as a commodity which the instructors provided to the students as consumers. Stakeholders are gaining greater significance in the global age which universities need to mediate the needs and investments from the industrial partners.

The Long Range Plan 2008-2022 enumerates the goal of Thai higher education as a system of quality. The nine key issues that the Plan intended to accomplish are: (1) articulation of university system with basic education and vocational education; (2) reforms of the existing university education system; (3) good governance and management; (4) national competitiveness; (5) university financing; (6) staff and personnel development; (7) university networks; (8) programmes for Southern Thailand; and (9) learning infrastructure.

Modern universities are facing the revenue needs and funding constraint from the government. According to Levin [10], they resorted to two behaviors. The first is marketization behavior whereas the second is to increase productivity and efficiency. The second behavior involves increasing the productivity of existing workers and reduce the number of

workers to lower the cost. Thai higher education employs the productivity approach in administration. They reduce the number of permanent teaching staff by hiring adjunct lecturers to teach general education courses. By hiring adjunct lecturers, universities do not have to spend on the salary and benefits in the same way as when they hire the permanent teaching staff.

However, Lao [3] argues that despite the question of transition to the autonomous model, universities must be regarded as places for higher learning. Nonetheless, public universities are now seen as autonomous and reliance on the tuition. They have to generate revenue through programs, academic services and research as well as having to serve the community. These increasing demands are the by-product of neo-liberal capitalistic force that put pressure on higher education to be accountable and result-driven to respond to the economic needs of the country. Doing so, the universities would ignore the real purpose and mission of higher education. These needs which Southall and Cobbing [2] propose would erode the former collegial style of governance. This also dissolves the true aim and missions of higher education.

III. ACADEMIC AUTHORITARIANISM

A. *The academic freedom under threat.*

Southall and Cobbing [2] cite UNESCO's definition of academic freedom as "the right, without constriction by prescribed doctrine, to freedom of teaching and discussion, freedom in carrying out research and disseminating and publishing the results thereof, freedom to express freely their opinion about the institution or system in which they work, freedom from institutional censorship and freedom to participate in professional or represent live academic bodies" [2 p. 1]. This guideline is universal. The definition is far from realities in Thai higher education.

Generally, "administrative authoritarianism" as a new form of managerialism in higher education represents a "major attack upon academic freedom" [2 p. 34]. Administrative authoritarianism can put individual academics in jeopardy by exerting centralised control over the academic staff. If the academics show dissents or criticisms to the system, they will be subjected to the scrutiny and retribution. Controversially, the managerial are not subjected to the same practice. They are not accountable for the decisions that they made. This imbalance of power check and balances is a threat to academic freedom. There is a shift from collegial voice of scholars to the interest of major stakeholders. This is confirmed by the statement of Jarernsripornkul and Pandey [12] that on the one hand, the [university] leaders' task is to serve the interest of the stakeholders. On the other hand, "the academic voices is somehow circumscribed by the interests of other stakeholders."

After the 1999 National Education Act and the subsequent 2002 issue, the status of Thai academics has changed tremendously. Formerly, academics were entitled the status of a civil servant and received benefits and incomes of the government workers, whereas after 1999 National Education

Act, the status of academics has been changed to the staff of the university. They receive greater amount of income but were stripped off the benefits of a civil servant. For many Thai higher education institutions, the new academics will face heavy expectations and many regulations. These are often stated in the employment contract. In the case of famous research universities, teaching staff are required to be on a tenure track. Within the first five years, they must become an Assistant Professor and within 10-15 years, an Associate Professor. Failure to do so results in employment contract termination. Although the system of tenure is being used in other countries e.g. the United States or Australia. The research system in Thailand is not supportive for the academics. This is due to the panel of research grants, and the regulations of financial assistance of the institution. Although it is fair to say that some universities have reform itself to become more responsive to today's trend, the reimbursement procedures and regulations are enacted from the government and do not support the research activities. Furthermore, in many universities, the system of using quality standard put academic in a difficult place as they are required to publish their research output. Staff are often burnt out due to heavy teaching workloads. This deprived them off the energy to conduct research and publication [3].

B. *The Downfall of Decentralization*

The reality of decentralization contrast with the National Education Acts 1999. The acts enacted that the government needed to decentralize the public organizations and redistribute the power to the local governance agencies. The process of decentralization also involves higher education through restructuring and reform. Universities were restructured from the government agencies to autonomous model. So far 28 higher education institutions in Thailand have become autonomous. Their degree of success varies. While some institutions are able to cope with the declining assistance from the state, other institutions state their preference to remain within the state supervision.

State intervention can occur in many forms. Slaughter [10] sees the domination of the state over higher education as not simply a source of money or authority. The state exercises the power through other channels such as social policies. Student policies and funding behavior are viewed as expression of social policies that are free from the imposition of capitalistic behavior [10 pp. 242-243]. Hartman and Hines [10] categorize the five areas of higher education that government can exercise control over. These are goals and purposes of higher education, values and norms, programs, management and resources [10 p. 250]. Thai higher education is overseen by the multiple boards and regulated by the Ministry of Education and other agencies. State intervention in Thai universities is considered high level, but it was conducted through law and regulations, funding and support as well as policies. The report of Anderson and Johnson [13] classifies Thailand as the medium influence group of countries that are influenced by the government.

Jarernsripornkul and Pandey [12] reported the diminishing morale among the academic workers in Thai autonomous universities. The greater government power is said to give the university freedom, but not the employees.

Some teaching staff reported the shortcoming of teaching and researching. They feel that they need to readjust their work to be in line with the university policy. Those whose work are not related to the main direction of the institution are less likely to receive support from the organisation. Jarernsiripornkil and Pandey [12] further stated that standardized regime prescribed by the university and the government altered the collegiate environment of the university.

IV. ACADEMIC CULTURE OF THAILAND

We acknowledge that the other factor in pushing Thai higher education into academic authoritarianism is the culture itself. The statement from Hallinger and Kantamara [14] is on Thai schools but also applies to Thai higher education context stating “it is not that educators are not asking for changes. Instead, they recognise that the system is inefficient and ineffective in responding to the needs.” [14 p. 191] However, Hallinger and Kantamara [14] delineate that “when [the educators] faced with these challenging new approaches to management, learning and teaching, Thai educators remain subject to traditional Thai cultural values, assumptions, and norm [14 p. 191]. Thus, they present that leaders in Thai school need to be adept at negotiating the traditional culture and knowledgeable in the ways if ‘modern’ education reforms [14 p. 190]. The situation is similar to higher education in Thailand, where there is wide recognition of an ineffective and unresponsive system in administration and management. Yet, there is little that the executives can do to alleviate the problems.

According to Hofstede’s research on culture [14], the leadership in Thai education institution tends to follow the power-distance where the leaders retain high control over administration. In higher education, the use of power is obvious that the executives remain their absoluteness in exercising their power. The use of power check and balance are sometimes omitted especially if it is used against the executives or the council.

V. CONCLUSION

The article would like to recap its stance that authoritarianism is becoming widespread in Thailand. The academic staff are pressured into heavier workload and research publication. Academic authoritarianism is partly a result of reform and restructure of modern higher education institutions. Autonomy of university leads to the managerialism through implementation of education quality systems and effectiveness in administration. While the former collegial governance is being rooted out, more universities have employed the corporate model in running the institutions. The concept is refuted and suggests that the council and the executives find the balance in managing universities without participating in the “global ranking” bandwagon. Lao [2] calls for the “conceptual reimagining of

autonomy” of universities. Higher education institutions need to look beyond the financial and legal aspect of autonomy but to the management and academic aspect too. There has been a call for revisiting the role of autonomous universities [13][2]. It is noted that academic authoritarianism is perilous for academic freedom and creativity at large. As we are always reminded that universities are a place for cultivating academic mind and future of the country.

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