

# The Development of the Political Status of the Peasant Class in Thailand

## A Case Study of the Economic Changes of the Peasant Class

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### ABSTRACT

When researchers look back at Thailand's political and economic development, researchers can find that the process is full of uncertainties: frequent military coups, violent confrontations, high dependence on foreign markets, and lack of independence. In this environment, Thai peasants, as a large number of social groups, have long been at a disadvantage in the political struggle in Thailand. However, as Thailand's economy develops further, the power of Thai peasants is growing: they are beginning to be willing and able to fight for their rights. This paper hopes to analyze the development course of Thai peasant politics after the fall of the Thaksin government and the process of Thai government modernization by analyzing the growth of the Thai peasant class's economic status and its connection with the new capital group's economic and political interests. In conclusion, the economic changes in the Thailand impacts on the peasant class to some extent.

**Keywords:** *Modernization, Political unrest, Economic reform.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since the coup d'etat in 1932, the process of Thailand's political and economic modernization has been constantly confronted with internal and external indirect or direct impact and resistance. Internally, not only has the army repeatedly attacked the elected government and all the forces it represents through coups, but also the influence of the Thai royal family on the political situation and the non-institutionalized political movements have played an important role in Thai politics. In addition, the impact of the novel coronavirus outbreak in 2020 on the production and life of the secondary industry and the impact of the tertiary industry, especially tourism, have again impacted the process of economic modernization.

Economic status determines the political status of a particular interest group. With the development of Thailand's economy, the political influence of various emerging interest groups has gradually increased. Among these new interest groups, The Thai Rak Thai party (TRT), with its "grassroots policies" of providing tax breaks and funds for the lower class, has won the support of the vast rural class, making it the largest political party in the Lower house of Thailand since the constitution was

enacted in 1997. Although Mr. Thaksin's government fell in 2006, his economic policies towards peasants were partly preserved by the opposition. This paper hopes to study the changes in the economic status of the peasant class, to get the influence of the Thai peasant class on the political development of Thailand, and provide the theoretical basis for the Thai government-related policies.

## 2. THE ECONOMIC SITUATION FACING FARMERS IN THAILAND

### 2.1 Thailand's economic development and the impact on peasants

Thailand's economic development before the 21st century can be roughly divided into three stages. The first phase, from the 1950s to the 1970s, was the accumulation of initial funds for industrialization through the export of agricultural products. From The first six-year Plan (1961-1966) to The second six-year Plan (1967-1971) (The National Economic and Social Development Plan), Thailand focused its Development on agriculture and related enterprises. And through expanding opening to the outside world, introducing foreign investment, infrastructure, and other measures to a great extent to

promote Thailand's economic development. The second stage is the substantial development of the second and tertiary industries from 1971 to 1990: the proportion of agricultural labor force in the total labor force in Thailand dropped from 79% to 60%, and the labor force in manufacturing and service industries also improved on a large scale. The third stage, from 1990 to the present, is to develop an export-oriented economy, improve industrial labor productivity, and shift from a labor-intensive economy to capital - and technology-intensive economy.

As a developing country whose agricultural population accounts for the vast majority of the country's total population, Thailand has been deeply involved in the process of modernization with the development of Thailand's economy. Moreover, Thailand's economic development has been built on the exploitation and exploitation of the countryside. It is generally believed that Thailand's modernization process began in 1961 with The National Economic and Social Development Plan, which was The first consistent and comprehensive Plan introduced by The Thai government. Plans to industrialize and modernize Thailand. Since then, Thailand's economy has developed to a great extent, and the urbanization rate has peaked twice: from 20.9% in 1970 to 26.8% in 1980, and from 31.4% in 2000 to 51.4% in 2020. However, as Samuel P. Huntington wrote, "Modernity breeds stability, while modernization breeds turmoil [1]." From an economic point of view, promote urbanization and modernization in the country at the same time, the agglomeration effects caused by large cities such as Bangkok, Thailand as well as their own because of the second industry brought by the industrialization and the development of the third industry as peasants to avoid the economic crisis of the rural internal a means of attracting a large number of rural populations into cities[1]. However, there are not enough jobs in the inner cities to absorb these workers, resulting in rising unemployment. This phenomenon is reflected in politics as the rise of street politics and the further deepening of contradictions.

In the industrial structure, Thailand's economy itself has a strong dependence on the external market. As a member of East Asia's industrial chain, its manufacturing development was initially brought about by the transfer of light and labor-intensive industries, such as textiles and processing manufacturing, from upstream Japan in the 1970s. However, in the East Asian production sector, its manufacturing sector faces competition from countries at the same level of the industrial chain, such as Myanmar, Vietnam, and China[2]. The competition is reflected in the industrial transfer of major developed countries and regions in Asia to similar countries. Moreover, The squeezing effect of China's position in the middle and middle reaches of the East Asian industrial chain on Thailand, which originally produced intermediate products further deepens the difficulties of Thailand's

industrial upgrading[3]. Although Thailand surpassed \$3,044 in 1996, its capital-intensive and technology-intensive industries are still not fully developed. Take the manufacturing industry as an example, the largest export product of Thailand in 2020 is 37.7billion US dollars of Machinery including Computers[4]. However, there are no Thai companies with strong competitiveness in related fields.

The above factors reflect the problems faced by Thailand's peasant class: second, the inadequate development of the tertiary industry makes these employment sectors unable to absorb the majority of the population living in rural areas, resulting in the inefficient traditional agriculture in Thailand. At the same time, in the case of inadequate development of the secondary and tertiary industries, the whole society is not enough to create enough wealth for the government to balance the interests of various parties and support the peasant class. With the development of society, the Thai peasants themselves began to seek their rights and interests in politics. However, the presence of the Thai peasant class in Thai politics is integrated with the new Capital group, rather than characteristic of the class itself. Represented by Thaksin's new capital group based on the policy of "grassroots", that is, through support for peasants against the traditional interest groups, namely, to establish economic participation in globalization degree shallow in Thailand when the alliance between the army and the royal [5], and the deepening globalization after the formation of the anti-globalization the interests of the group, for example, in the face of other Southeast Asian countries and China's labor-intensive industries in the global market to lose out[6]. In this stage, because the peasant class accounted for the majority of the total population of Thailand, it had an advantage in the democratic political election compared with the traditional political groups, which made Thaksin and Thai Rak Thai parties successfully elected in 2001. Since then, as an emerging political force, the new capital group has been regarded as a capital group representing the interests of the peasantry through its organic combination with the peasantry.

### **3. THAI RAK THAI: NEW CAPITAL GROUP'S POLICY TOWARDS THE THAI PEASANT CLASS**

Peasants are naturally conservative and introverted, so they do not have too strong political power. However, thanks to the modernization drive, the peasant class became connected with the outside world and thus joined the political struggle in Thailand. However, Thailand's peasant class has not produced a political party that represents its class. Despite relevant attempts, the final result was that the peasant class chose Thaksin, who "indirectly bought elections" through various economic policies and controlled TV and radio to promote the

government [7]. Nonetheless, it has not completely gotten rid of the influence of the Asian financial crisis in Thailand, Thaksin's many policies, such as "30 baht cure all ills," one village one product such as bias "grassroots" policy, to some extent adapted to the needs of economic development at that time, Thailand to help recover faster from the Asian financial crisis in Thailand. Moreover, under Thaksin's administration, the contradiction between the development of Thailand's dual confrontation between urban and rural areas has been alleviated: The poverty gap at \$3.20 per day(2011 PPP) percentage of Thai population has decreased from 4% in 2000 to 1.2% in 2006, Which is the year that Thaksin was replaced by a military coup. At the same time, the peasant class was mobilized for the first time and burst out a powerful force in the election. Finally, Thai Rak Thai won 176 seats in the 500 seats of the House of Representatives in 2001 and became the largest party of HOR[8].

Thaksin and his Thai Rak Thai party influence the peasant class not only in terms of policy but also in terms of meaning. Before THE Thai Rak Thai Party, the Thai government since 1932, when Thailand started its constitutional monarchy, represented more traditional political forces, namely the royal family, the military, and the traditional industrial and commercial circles. As Thailand modernizes, more and more interest groups have the strength and will to fight for power and interests through politics. For example, the military junta, the urban middle class, whose power had also been boosted by modernization, declared an end to military rule in the 1990s. However, the political status of the peasant class, which makes up the vast majority of The Thai population, has been neglected. With the gradual completion of Thailand's infrastructure construction and the gradual popularization of the Internet, mobile phones, and other applications, the conditions for peasants to participate in electoral politics can be met. The combined influence of peasant-New Capital groups has upset Thailand's balance of political power. However, the combination of the peasant class and the new capital group is not independent, but the peasant class is dependent on the new capital group. Under the combination of the two, in addition, the policy adopted by Thaksin to attract the peasant class failed to create enough extra wealth and forced the resource tilt from the city to the countryside, which intensified the opposition between the urban middle class and the urban group and the rural group. Moreover, Thaksin also tried to control the military: during his term of office, cuts in Thailand's military expenditure and attempts to interfere in the appointment of personnel within the military caused dissatisfaction among the military [9]. Even though Thai Rak Thai won the support of the vast peasant class [10]. In the end, the Thai Rak Thai party lost power in the face of the enormous social resources of the opposition: on September 19, 2006, the Thai military announced the

dissolution of the Cabinet led by Thaksin and the establishment of a military government. Even though Thai Rak Thai won again in the general election in 2005, its electoral victory did not reflect the advantages of social resources owned by the class it represented.

#### **4. THE POLITICAL CONFLICT THAT FOLLOWED THE FALL OF THE THAKSIN GOVERNMENT**

As mentioned above, the Thai Rak Thai party's series of policies towards the peasant class and its subsequent opposition reflect the antagonism of Thai society to a certain extent. First, Thai Rak Thai's policy of helping peasant in the governing stage has given it certain economic strength to support its own political demands. Second, by using populism to mobilise the underclass, Thai Rak Thai has succeeded in galvanising the political participation of Thailand's peasants. After the fall of Mr Thaksin's government, the succeeding junta faced fierce opposition from the UDD, also known as the Red Shirts, a pro-Thaksin political group made up mostly of peasants and the urban poor. Not only that, but the return to power of Thaksin's likeness, Samak Sundaravej and his successor, Somchai Vongsawat, in late 2007, with elections now open, reflects the inertia and strength of Thailand's rural class after Mr Thaksin's mobilisation.

With the increase of political participation of the peasant class, its influence on the trend of Thai politics also gradually increased. And the increase of the influence is reflected in the political conflict brought by the intensifying: traditional nomenklatura to dread the advantage of the peasantry on the ballot, and amend the constitution in 2007, pro-thaksin alliance of democracy against dictatorship (UDD), and the people's alliance for democracy (PAD) of fundamental interests between opposites creates the fierce confrontation between the two: the struggle between the peasant class and the traditional elites gradually became non-procedural: After the pro-Thaksin government led by the People Power Party won the general election in 2007, the Yellow Shirts launched a broad street political movement in November 2008 to demand Mr Samak. Shun Daravej, prime minister of Thailand's People Power Party government, stepped down. As the political crisis deepened, the Constitutional Court disbanded the People's Power Party for alleged fraud in the general election. In December 2008, the Democratic Party of Thailand, which represents the traditional power elite, joined the former Thai Party, the former Moderate Democratic Party, the Vakuin Party and the Thai People for National Development Party to form a ruling coalition. A combination of factors led Mr Abhisit to call an early election by dissolving Parliament in May 2011. But when Mr Thaksin's sister, Yingluck Shinawatra, became prime minister, the PAD reversed itself again: it took to the streets. Finally, amid a wave of opposition, Yingluck announced that she would dissolve

the lower house of parliament and call new elections. In the ensuing political confrontation, street politics intensified and eventually provided the Thai military with a reason for the coup: Thai Army Commander Prayuth Chan-ocha announced a coup, dissolving the government.

The anti-Thaksin faction eventually won: Prayuth Chan-ocha. Zhan Okcha represents the traditional elite and suppresses the pro-Thaksin "grassroots". However, through populist mobilization, the increased willingness of Thailand's rural class to engage in political struggle forced the anti-Thaksin groups to make rural concessions in exchange for support, for example, Mr Abhisit's government had promised in the 2011 election to ensure the grain price, to provide free education and other populist policies having his letter sent supporters [11], such as the junta Mei Town of five million baht life quality improvement plan, provide about \$3.73 billion of preferential loans and long-term cash to help peasants find alternative work income [12]. Thus the political movement of Thailand's peasant class came to an end: the mass gathering of red Shirts in cities to express their demands through street political movements almost never happened again. Moreover, the support rate for the government is also maintained at a high level: according to a poll conducted by Bangkok University, the public's satisfaction with the Government of Prayuth Was 5.92 points in 2015 [13]. This represents that Prayuth government's policies during his reign have to some extent met the needs of Thailand's peasant class. As a result, this model seems to be more conducive to the stable development of Thai politics: compared with the radical and populist parties represented by Thaksin [14], Thailand's urban middle class, traditional elites and old capitalist groups are more willing to accept a government that represents their interests; To stabilize the peasant class, the Thai government had to tilt resources towards the countryside through policies to gain support. Thanks to a tilt towards rural resources, Prayuth's government and Thaksin's became Thailand's two longest-running parties in the 21st century. The main reason for their success in this way is the role of agriculture in developing countries. Agriculture has played an important role in the economy of many developing countries: before industrialization and modernization, agriculture was mostly used as a tool to earn foreign exchange through export and provide the original accumulation of capital for the development of the secondary industry.

#### ***4.1. Agriculture developed in the political conflict***

In addition, agriculture in developing countries accommodates a large number of the working population and accounts for the vast majority of the rural population's income before the development of their second and tertiary industries are mature. Therefore, the development of agriculture has become the government's

primary goal. As a country endowed with agricultural resources, Thailand naturally has the advantage of developing agriculture. The Thai government also began to increase the support for agriculture in the 1960s, such as reducing the import tariff of chemical fertilizer and credit subsidies for purchasing inorganic fertilizer and agricultural machinery, to promote agricultural export. Thanks to the development of agriculture, the Peasant class of Thailand, which accounts for the majority of the Thai population, gained the opportunity to rise the social ladder and escape from poverty [15]: The poverty headcount ratio at \$1.90 a day (2011 PPP) decreased from 19.3% in 1981 to 0.7% in 2006, Per capita GDP rose from \$2,590 in 1981 to \$7,819 in 2006 [16]. To some extent, the economic development has satisfied the demands of the peasant class, making it unnecessary for them to participate in political movements on a large scale. With the development of industrialization and modernization, the degree of urbanization in Thailand is gradually increasing, and more peasants are entering cities to work. However, the Asian financial crisis of 1997 interrupted this process: the Thai baht continued to fall and the stock market collapsed. Although the Thai government carried out neoliberal reforms according to the guidance of IMF, such as increasing liquidity, relaxing fiscal and monetary policies, and actively dealing with the social impact caused by the crisis [17], the real economy remained depressed. It is widely believed by Domestic Thai enterprises that neoliberal-led reforms such as privatization, tariff reduction, and reliance on foreign investment in the face of the financial crisis will seriously damage the interests of local Thai enterprises [18]. Moreover, the neoliberal policy made the Thai government no longer support domestic enterprises, which forced local enterprises to protect their interests through direct control of the government [19].

### **5. THE FUTURE OF THAI POLITICS**

In an ideal world, with the development of Thailand's modernization process, the living standard and income of the peasant class will be improved along with the popularization of education and a series of conditions. Part of the peasantry has been transformed into the middle class so that democracy can work better and populism can be avoided. Moreover, democracy can maintain political order well without the uncertainty of a military coup. However, this progress needs to be underpinned by an economic foundation: stable societies need to provide enough channels for upward mobility, and enough technology-intensive and capital-intensive industries to provide enough jobs for those at the bottom of the educational ladder. As the industrial upgrading of the peasant class leads to the transformation of some peasants into the middle class, the power of the urban white-collar class itself will be weakened. Therefore, in Thailand, where the traditional elite has a strong influence, it becomes a key issue whether the peasant

class has enough ability to defend its interests in future political development. Therefore, conflicts between various social forces need to be carried out within a political system with stable political order [1], to establish a stable system that can accommodate the majority of social forces to protect the voice of vulnerable groups and avoid military coups that overthrow elected governments in Thai history. Some scholars proposed temporary authoritarianism to establish government authority to form a stable political order, and use this to develop Thailand's economy and balance contradictions of all parties incrementally [20]. For this to happen, however, Prayuth's government and its likely successors will need to put national interests above party and personal interests and pursue a determined development strategy to modernize the country and unite Thailand.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Along with Thailand's exploration of democracy and modernization, the Thai peasant class is inevitably involved in the process of exploration and has a variety of subjective or objective influences on this process. For Thai peasants, only a small part of them have enjoyed the economic dividend of national modernization and the guarantee of human rights brought by the development of the democratic system. The improvement of economic development and political system cannot be achieved overnight. With the gradual development of Thailand's economy, people's demand for a stable government that can take into account the interests of most social groups is increasing day by day, and the political development of Thailand is gradually becoming stable. However, Thailand still faces challenges and difficulties in upgrading its economic structure: insufficient talent reserve, the impact of COVID-19, and other circumstances that have objectively increased the difficulty of upgrading Thailand's economic structure. It remains to be seen whether Thailand's political system will be able to handle social conflicts. At the same time, Thailand is vulnerable to external factors due to its high degree of external dependence and small country size. Therefore, it is difficult to make simple generalizations about Thailand's future development based on the evidence on which analysis of Thailand's current situation relies. Looking forward to the future development of the Thai peasant class, or even providing theoretical support to help them improve their living standards and protect their human rights, they also face various difficulties.

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