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From Bureaucratic Polity to Neo-Pluralism and Institutionalism: the Politics of Thai Higher Education

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Abstract

This article seeks to understand Thai higher education in its political terms. Taking a theoretical approach with academic studies of the Thai political system, Thai higher education can be viewed, from the past to the present, through the lenses of 'bureaucratic polity,' 'neo-pluralism,' and the 'institutionalist' approaches. The linkage between theories of Thai politics and the higher education system can be used as a basis for understanding the overall context of the Thai higher education system. First, this study argues that the 'bureaucratic polity' remains the key to explaining the country's higher education system in the historical period. Despite the efforts of oppositional forces, the historical period saw the imposition of a 'top-down' model, where state authority took complete control of the universities. The study also examines the contemporary period, in which the location of authority shifted as a result of political and socio-economic changes in the country's wider context. This period has witnessed the rising fragmentation of other interest groups outside the bureaucracy. These situations can be best explained through the 'neo-pluralist' and 'institutionalist' approaches. Finally, the study concludes that Thai higher education is an arena of conflicts and consensus for key related forces within the system. In its current condition, there are as yet no signs of long-term beneficial effects to serve wider public interests.

Introduction

It is true to say that Thai higher education is a mirror image of the Thai political system. To understand the fundamental problems of Thai higher education, it is vital to relate Thai higher education to the country's political system. Since higher education cannot be viewed as separate from its socio-economic and political environment, this article scrutinizes the Thai higher education sector from the very early to the contemporary periods, by using theoretical approaches in the study of Thai politics. From that perspective, higher education is merely a reflexive study of the Thai political regime as being a place where political actors seek to follow narrow interests. Whenever one suggests that higher education has been a root cause of all problems in the country, or that higher education would be a solution to resolve the country's crises, one must come to terms with the fact that higher education may not be a cause or an effect, but rather a reflection of the political process.

The 'bureaucratic polity' model has been used to understand Thai higher education's context during its first establishment. When the bureaucratic sector became challenged with the increasingly complex demands made by various interest groups, from the 1970s onwards, the Thai higher education sector can be best understood through the 'neo-pluralist' and 'institutionalist' approaches.

Some might argue that Thai politics is far too complex to be captured with any particular approach. It is always questionable whether particular political events fit with the "bureaucratic polity" model or any of the other approaches that have been suggested. In the same way, the circumstances of Thai higher education have always been very complex throughout its history. However, by using the theoretical approach that Hewison (1997) suggested regarding political change in Thailand, these analytical tools help to understand the complex and changing situation of Thai higher education in different periods.

This article begins by linking Thai higher education with the 'bureaucratic polity' model. This model has been useful for explaining Thai higher education's situation since its first establishment. The following section goes on to discuss Thai higher education in its 'neo-pluralist' and 'institutionalist' approaches, in which one can see various key players at different levels attempting to open channels of influence in an expanded higher education and political arena. The article concludes that the forces of mainly elite interest groups in the higher education sector provide no hope for a better result.

Thai Higher Education and its "Bureaucratic polity" model

The 'bureaucratic polity' model has been useful in explaining the Thai higher education system in the early period (Riggs, 1966). From the establishment of Chulalongkorn University, the first full-fledged university in Thailand, in 1917, to the 1970s, it had been nearly 50 years in which the key players who took control of the Thai higher education system had been members of the royal elites and military-civilian bureaucrats. The primary reason that these elites became involved with the system must be understood in the country's socio-economic and political context. Thai higher education was first established under the system of absolute monarchy, during the reign of King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910), followed by that of King Vajiravudh (1919-1925) (Watson, 1991: 561). During that period, the concept of bureaucracy was introduced as a form of rule by government officials (Wyatt, 1969: 379; Smith, 2003: 159). This was a period in which the Thai bureaucracy grew rapidly. Government expenditures climbed at a higher annual rate of nearly 14 per cent in the 1890s, and the staffs of the new ministries increased respectively (Wyatt, 1994: 235).

Consequently, higher education was originally the state's apparatus to serve the rapid development of the country. Its priority was to train members of the royal elites and those involved in royal court circles to become '*kharatchakarn*', a Thai term for those in the service of the king (Wichit, 1974: 74; Wright, 1991; MUA, 1992: 18; Krissanapong, 2002: 3). During that time, bureaucratic values were strongly entrenched in Thai society. The bureaucrats' work was considered the most prestigious, and was reserved for members of the royal family and the elites who had obtained degrees from abroad or from

state institutions. Thus, higher education was considered elitist, as a means to enhance the social status of certain individuals based on the patronage system (Wright, 1991: 18).

Due to the absolute power of the state, the first university, Chulalongkorn, was organized as part of the University Department in the Ministry of Education (Wichit, 1974: 74). In the same way as other civil service sectors, especially those of military and police departments, the internal management of Chulalongkorn University was very bureaucratic-centric. The rector, being called "commander in chief", administered all the internal matters of the university, including the academic, financial, human resources, and infrastructure (Rattana, 2015: 42).

Following the absolute rule of the monarchs, in 1932, the political situation changed. A coup was successfully carried out by influential military-civilians, mainly led by the head of the People's party, Pridi Banomyong, a law graduate from France, in alliance with the army. This coalition of elites framed Thailand's first constitution, which placed the King under the law. One of the important goals of the People's party concerned 'the right of the people to access education" (MUA, 1992: 33). Pridi founded *Thammasat lae Karn Mueng* University (the University of Moral and Political Science) in 1933. This allowed people from all walks of life who had completed secondary school or had gained the equivalent academic qualifications to acquire tertiary education.

The early years of Thammasat's administration saw an attempt by the civilian forces to liberate the university from the state's control. The creation of Thammasat University for the first time established the idea of a university council, made up of senior chair holders (Patom, 1989; Varunee, 1990). The university was free from the state's control, in contrast to Chulalongkorn University, which was part of the Ministry of Education and retained its prestigious value of higher education for the nation's elites (MUA, 1992: 33). However, this liberal style was not particularly sustainable, because Thammasat University, which was the pioneer of this idea, retained its autonomous system only for the 16 years of the 'Pridi era.' He was eventually exiled as a consequence of political conflicts (Akagi, 1977: 42). The civilian forces were replaced by the new Phibun government in 1952, and military and bureaucratic forces took control of the system.

When the new Phibun government came to power, Thammasat University was placed under state control. The word "political' was removed from its name, and so it has remained to this day (Prizzia, 1985: 38). This intervention was an attempt by the government to implement its desire to eliminate all traces of Pridi's influence. Like Chulalongkorn University, Thammasat University was put under the Ministry of Education and considered another route to serve the bureaucracy (Watson, 1991: 562). As a consequence, the potential to develop liberal education and the concept of professional development unrestrained by the bureaucracy was distorted by the military government. The bureaucracy remained embedded inside Thai higher education institutions, and the influence of the state remained dominant.

During the Phibun administration's 'Era of Nation Building', three more universities were established in 1942 and 1943 to accommodate the country's manpower demands in specialized areas. The universities were named Mahidol (University of Medicine), Kasetsart (University of Agriculture), and Silpakorn (University of Fine Arts). This period again saw the continuation of strict state-control of the Thai higher education system, despite an attempt in the early part of the period to liberate the universities (Varunee, 1990: 5; Watson, 1991: 561-2; Neave and Van Vught, 1994: 12). The ruling elite wished to maintain its authority by putting the institutions under strict state control. The first two universities were administered by the Ministry of Public Health and the Ministry of Agriculture respectively, while the last came under the Ministry of Education (Prizzia, 1985: 38). These universities were driven by the original idea of Thai higher education as a training ground for civil servants. Instead of fostering a spirit of critical inquiry, the universities tended to produce specialists in limited fields who served the particular needs of a specific branch of government service (Watson, 1991: 562).

Moreover, in the curricula taught by the universities in that early period, academic freedom was limited. Although there were a number of foreign teachers from England, France, and the United States, the majority of the teaching staff were Thai. The attitudes and values that were encouraged were largely based on Buddhist Morality, including subservience to elders and acceptance not only of the traditions of the past but of the existing patterns of society (Watson, 1989: 90). The links between universities and specific ministries undermined intellectual development and the independence of the universities. During these periods, Thai higher education maintained a limited relationship with society, since the bureaucracy was the preserve of the elites. The universities were all to be found in Bangkok. This restriction to the capital city reflected the uneven distribution of access to higher education (Watson, 1991).

While discussing the 'bureaucratic polity' model in the Thai higher education system, it is important to emphasize that universities were part of the bureaucracy and those working in public universities were civil servants. The teaching and academic staff had a lifelong tenure as public servants, with associated rights and privileges, such as full medical coverage, housing allowance, and the right to received royal decorations (Welch, 2011: 91). The idea that universities were part of the bureaucracy certainly shaped the norms of individuals. This lead them to prioritize prestige, relative power, and stability, rather than developing an identity as academics.

Moreover, during the first 40 years of the establishment of public universities in Thailand, the full-time university lecturer system was not well-established. All universities applied the part-time lecturer system, which means civil servants from various ministries were employed to teach in universities on the side (Rangsan, 2001: 309-310). The number of part-time lecturers was higher than the number of full-time staff (Varunee, 1990: 259). The use of this part-time lecturer system reflected the priority of the Thai state to stick to the concept of 'training civil servants,' rather than allowing the universities to become institutions that are designed to produce advanced knowledge (Rangsan, 2001: 311). Due to the

embedded bureaucracy in Thai universities, the most powerful figure does not need to be the most experienced or qualified professor. Rather, the authority is focused around the high ranking university administrators such as the presidents, and deans. In Thai universities, there are those academics that prefer to hold the administrators' status, because they gain benefits and can make important decisions (Rattana, 2015: 182). This shows how bureaucratic values dominated within the university sphere, thus reducing academic professionalism.

Following the Phibun regime, the dictatorial regime of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat also embraced the state's power over the higher education sector. Following Sarit's national socio-economic development plan, which was largely elite-centered and influenced by the American experts, there was an expansion of universities to other provinces. The focus of this plan was on the distributional impact of growth, regional development, the lessening of rural-urban income differentials, and equal access to job opportunities and social services (World Bank, 1989: xi). Consequently, Chiang Mai, KhonKaen, and Prince Songkhla Universities were founded in 1960, 1962, and 1965, respectively (Varaporn, 2006: 192).

One of the key rationales in creating provincial universities was that the government was aware of the threat of communism in the countryside. The educational expansion to the rural areas was mainly undertaken based on security considerations (Thak, 1979: 234). When the government felt these pressures, it rushed to establish the universities in regional areas without researching the willingness and readiness of the regions. That action led to the problem of 'centre-periphery' relationships, in other words, the new universities suffered from genuine shortcomings. Qualified teachers were not willing to serve in isolated rural areas; there was a lack of library research facilities and equipment and resources; and the number of enrolled students was limited. It took some time, but by the late 1970s these universities had become prestigious in their own right. However, the process of sending staff and managing from the center reflected top-down control, which would hardly meet the rural demands (Watson, 1991: 566; Arai, 1977: 38).

During Sarit's government, Thai universities acted as the followers, rather than as leaders or participants in policy planning. Watson (1991, p. 564) pointed out that it was not until the fourth national social and economic development plan (1977-1981) that university staff actually became involved in the planning process. This reflected not only the role of the followers, but also the limited capacity of academic research to direct the government's policy. While the national economic and social development plans were formulated by Sarit's government as 'part and parcel of the execution of American policy' (Thak, 1979: 255), the plans were regarded by the Thai higher education sector as an imperative blueprint to be followed. It needs to be understood that Thai universities largely depended on the state's direct control in all internal matters such as finance, staffing, and management.

The dictatorial regime of Sarit demonstrated the state's power over the higher education sector in other ways as well. Sarit's government realized that the student movement had been instrumental in the removal of Phibun's regime in 1957. Thus, when he came to power, he suppressed university student activism according to two distinct plans. The first was announced in 1959, when he arranged for every university to be administered by the Office of the National Education Commission (ONEC), which reported directly to the Prime Minister's Office. This made it easier for the government to monitor students (MUA, 1992: 162-163). The establishment of ONEC was a way to centralize higher education's strategizing and planning. It was perceived as an imposing trend that would serve a rigid military dictatorship. At that time, the Prime Minister consolidated absolute power to control universities in terms of planning and internal affairs, focusing on the concepts of standardization, centralization, and the harmonization of nation plans and education objectives (Rattana, 2015: 45-46).

The second mechanism imposed by the government was to install military politicians as presidents of the universities. For example, Field Marshal Thanom became the president of Thammasat University from 1950 to 1953; Field Marshal Prapas became the president of Chulalongkorn University from 1951 to 1959; and Marshal Prasert was appointed president of Chiangmai University (MUA, 1992: 162-163). These measures secured the authoritarian military government's control over higher education. Moreover, Field Marshal Sarit himself took part in various positions such as the President of the University Council, President of the ONEC, and President of the University Committee (Rattana, 2015: 46). The direct intervention of the military state in the universities made it difficult for academics to protect their intellectual space.

The centralized management of higher education in Thailand must be understood in the broader context of the country's politics and the attempt to govern the universities' activities. The government's strategy to control universities and students was partly embodied in the regulations stipulating the wearing of uniforms by university students, which were drawn up during this period (MUA, 1992: 187-188). Government policies made clear that challenging the dominant power was not to be tolerated. Higher education once more came under state control.

The bureaucratic elites played the most important role from the period of absolute monarchy until that of the authoritarian military regimes. Rival ideas and actions, such as the creation of Thammasat University or the students' movements during 1950s, were suppressed by the military state. Although right-wing repression continued, the contrasting forces of the military state and the student movement continued to exist. As Anderson (1998: 173) suggested the voice of this 'new bourgeois strata gradually emerged and did not disappear', however, they remained of secondary importance.

The priorities of Thai higher education in that early period can be summarized in three main points: 1) the primary objective of the universities was to serve as training grounds for civil servants; 2) the state's

control over the universities' affairs was powerful and centralized; and 3) the structure, norms and values inside Thai public universities were bureaucratic. These three main points marked a real beginning of Thai higher education system and remain embedded as core elements in Thai higher education.

Higher education with the neo-pluralist and institutionalist approaches

Hewison (1997:6) has suggested that the Thai political system could progress from the idea of 'bureaucratic polity' to a variety of theoretical approaches. He identified two theoretical approaches: the first included the 'neo-pluralist' and 'institutionalist' approaches; and the second was the 'political economy' approach. This section attempts to understand Thai higher education from the 1970s onwards by applying the first theoretical approach, as it best captures the politics of Thai higher education during this contemporary period.

The 'neo-pluralist' approach focuses on a new kind of relationship between business and bureaucracy, in which the first becomes more influential than the latter. Business groups many times are more privileged and have more say than the state. Regarding the 'institutionalist' approach, Hewison (1997:6) has noted that the political system has developed "channels of influence" for a range of interest groups, and that these groups are 'single-issue interest groups lobbying for their own particular benefit.' This approach essentially reduces politics to a 'distributive game' where some interest groups gain support or subsidies at the expense of the majority. A shift towards the 'neo-pluralist' and 'institutionalist' approaches occurred when the political space opened and allowed many interest groups to have channels of influence.

Empirically, it was realized that the political space in Thailand had widened and that the bureaucrats were no longer the only power controlling the policy-making process. The openness towards the market and the widened political space allowed other interest groups to be part of the process (see Anek, 1992: 13-15; Surin and McCargo, 1997: 147; Ockey, 2004). The uprisings of 1973 and 1976 witnessed the apex strength of the student movements in the Thai political system and triggered another turning point in political life (Unger, 1998: 65). Those events were the first time that the universities were able to challenge state authority. The broadening access to university education, which created new social values, encouraged Thai students to actively resist the state's authoritarian rule (Girling, 1981; Wyatt, 1982: 296; Somsakdi, 1987). The students' forces were joined by business forces, members of the middle class, labor unions, civilian politicians, and rural society, and the coalition continued to grow in strength. However, the military and bureaucracy did not disappear; they have remained an important part of the scene (Ockey, 2004; Bidhya, 2013).

In the higher education sector there are at least five key actors mainly representing extra-bureaucratic groups. These are politicians, technocrats, state civilian bureaucrats, academics, and upper and middle class students. Within the open political space, these elite groups are those who seek to gain short-term benefits from the higher education system. This article argues that they are all engaged in a self-

interested struggle for resources while the quality of education is under-prioritized. From the 1970s onwards, the situation in Thai higher education reflected the internal dynamics of various demands, the fragmentation of interests, and the bargaining process within the system.

Politicians/ Technocrats

The changes in the wider socio-economic and political context of the country allowed politicians and other interest groups to take part in the higher education system, which had once been reserved only for bureaucratic elites. This section discusses the involvement of politicians and technocrats in the higher education system. The year 1988 marked a significant move from the 'bureaucratic' to 'electoral' politics (Anek, 1992: 13-15; Hewison, 1997: 1; Chai-Anan, 2001: 85). The coming of the Anand civilian government in 1991-1992 and once again in 1992 brought an increasing role for 'high-caliber' technocrats whose authority and influence would normally have varied according to the political situation (McCargo, 1998; Bidhya, 2013: 141).

Both politicians' and technocrats' groups came to realize that higher education should be part of social reform projects following the 1997 constitution (Prawes, 2002: 26). Due to the increase in social demand for higher education, advancements in information technology, the globalization movement, and the economic crisis, higher education reform was put forward as one of the country's top agenda items (Sukanya, 2001: 466-468). The process of drafting the education bill took place, led by eminent figures in the field, including those from the economic, social and legal sectors. The National Education Act was promulgated in August 1999, during Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai's second-round government (1997-2001), and was amended in 2002 during Thaksin's government (2001-2006). The amendment of the National Education Act partly reflected the different opinions of the two governments.

Chuan's government gave importance to external conditions imposed by international funding agencies, new trends, the roles of the technocrats, public intellectuals, academics and bureaucratic elites. In contrast, Thaksin attempted to restrict political space by delegitimizing all non-formal politics, diminishing the remaining power of bureaucrats, and undermining the roles of independent bodies and technocrats (Pasuk and Baker, 2004: 229; Bidhya,2004; McCargo and Ukrist, 2005: 188). The actual implementation of the higher education reform was affected.

Undoubtedly, Thaksin's government was skeptical about the National Education Act that had been initiated by the Democratic government in 1999 (Ratchanee, 2001: 52; Thipsarin, 2014). During his term, Thaksin and his supporters reflected the strong opposition to the issues proposed by the Office of Education Reform established following the 1999 National Education Act. For example, Suvit Khunkitti during his term as Minister of Education declined to obey to the timeframe set by the National Education Act. He also criticized members of the Office of the Education Reform and other scholars who had played important roles in formulating the education reform policy on the grounds that they were the same people who had been very much involved with the country's education failures in the past. He

suggested that due to their involvement, they did not have any credibility to propose any ideas or approaches towards the reform (Thipsarin, 2014).

Concerning the reform, Thipsarin (2014) pointed out that different levels of commitment from the leaderships of governments responsible for policy implementation were one of the obstacles to the reform. From 1999-2009, there were three major groups of elites who assumed power: the first was the Democrat party and its associated scholars; the second was Thaksin Shinawatra and his supporters; and the last group was the elites who assumed power after the 2006 coup, the leader of which was Surayud Chulanont. These three groups came in with different interpretations and levels of commitment towards the reform. The first group focused on rules and regulations, especially commitment to the National Education Act. The second group disagreed with the approach of the first group. They tended to initiate their own ways of dealing with the reform, leading to the amendment of the reforms. They were skeptical towards National Education Act, and their government was reluctant to implement what the Act required. The third group of elites appointed Professor Wichit Srisa-an, former chairperson of the Executive Committee of the Office of Education Reform (Thipsarin, 2014). This appointment indicated that the third group tended to see eye-to-eye with the first group, aiming to remove the second group's power from Thai political arena. These events re-emphasized the struggles for political power within the education sector between the forces of the politicians, technocrats, and bureaucrats on one hand and the Thaksin's government on the other. During that particular time, reform was only rhetorical and did not lead to any significant changes.

Bureaucrats

Although the civilian politicians and technocrats had become influential in the decision-making process and in the country's political regime since the late 1980s, the bureaucrats still held considerable power and authority. They retained the administrative, judicial and coercive arms of the state. It was possible that the civilian bureaucrats could obstruct and delay policies and projects (Ockey, 2004: 147).

When we speak about bureaucrats in the higher education arena, there are two levels of bureaucrats: first, the bureaucrats at the state level; and second, the bureaucrats at the university level. In Thailand, the university lecturers possessed civil servant's status. The bureaucrats at both levels therefore have had close relationships, and they were considered only as bureaucrats of different organizational units. Sometimes, this created a blurred line between their links. The situation was slowly adjusted when the lecturers who entered the state's universities after the 1999 national education act were required to hold a university employee's status. The next section will discuss bureaucrats at the state's level and later at the university's level.

State's level

At the state level, the Ministry of University Affairs (MUA), currently the Office of Higher Education Commission (OHEC), was first established under the PM's Office in 1972, later becoming an independent Ministry in 1977. The MUA was the fruit of a political negotiation between the state and public universities (MUA, 1992: 176). It was added that the MUA's role was not based on state-control but rather based on state-support and coordination (Rattana, 2015: 47). MUA was seen as a unit that would deregulate the universities from the very strict and direct control of the military government. The issue of deregulation by the MUA is, however, debatable. There are differences of opinion as to whether the creation of MUA added further to the control of universities by government (Charas, 1996: 277), or if the public universities gained the highest freedom that the bureaucratic framework would allow (Varunee, 1990: 228). The MUA seemed to realize since its first founding that the fundamental values of the university are based on academic autonomy and freedom. Therefore, the MUA was designed to be relatively smaller than other Ministries, providing more flexibility towards universities (Rattana, 2015: 47). During the 1970s-1980s, however, Thai public universities still relied on the state's budget and had to conform to the state's national plan (Varunee, 1990: 228; Watson, 1991: 564). During its first establishment, MUA was responsible for the appointment of rectors and deans for each state university, approval of curricula, and the overseeing of general affairs in higher education institutions, as well as responsible for more than 80 per cent of the university's income (Rattana, 2015: 47).

The deregulation role of the MUA had clearly been put into practice during the sixth plan (1987-1991). The reason behind this move was that the Thai government had realized it could not share the burden of mass higher education, especially for the period of 1982-1988, when the government faced the budget deficit (Rangsan,2001). These deregulations and decentralizations were also done in response to both national and global political pressures for liberalization and reducing size of public sector.

To respond to such demands, the Thai state was forced to adjust and reform the internal administration of public universities and to give more flexibility to private universities. The government had to adjust its position to becoming a 'resources provider', in other words, to guarantee quality by adopting 'state supervision' rather than 'state control.' The university administrations were forced to change from 'bureaucratic' to 'businesslike' management (Neave and Van Vught, 1994, 12; Slaughter et.al, 1997).

During that first period of deregulation, MUA applied a 'laissez-faire' policy, urging public universities to rely on markets, seek outside funding, produce curricula to serve business sectors, generate their own income, and promote the establishment of private universities. Unger (1998: 170) termed 'laissez-faire' in Thai style as 'laissez-faire by accident' or 'Thai-style liberalism', which means that the state allowed the private sector to perform in economic terms while the state provided no credible commitments. This specific explanation encapsulated the situation of Thai higher education when the government started to deregulate the public universities' outside funding by stating that declaration on the budget need not

be made to the Ministry of Finance (Rangsan, 2001: 313). The state also delegated decision-making power for course approval and degree granting to the higher educational institution council (Varaporn, 2006: 199; Rattana, 2015: 128). Universities needed to pursue strategies of self-reliance and self-regulation as well as generate income from university products (Pad, 2013: 669). This initiative, reflecting a mismatch between rising demand and limited public financing, allowed greater freedom for universities to open a number of profitable 'special' programs, mainly to generate institutional income (Welch, 2011: 104). These programs were mushrooming in various types that were designed mainly to serve the potential customers. It was mentioned that these types of programs were introduced by Chulalongkorn University about 20 years ago in the form of an executive MBA, soon to be followed by the National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA), Ramkhamhaeng University (RU), Kasetsart University (KU), Mahidol University and many others (Welch, 2011: 104). The number of courses on offer greatly increased from 235 in 2003 to 3,195 in 2007. These quantities came at the expense of the quality (Welch, 2011: 103).

However, during the time when these courses were on the rise, the MUA did not provide 'credible commitment' towards qualitative results. Indeed, during the period of the 'laissez-faire' policy, the MUA still connected its authority to the 'higher education plans' and the 'MUA's regulations,' reflecting the bureaucracy's determination to hold on to redundant authority and retain process-control. The 'autonomy' at this period remain awkward, because the MUA still retained its pre-auditing of procedural matters. It was particularly strict with private universities, and it held on to rigid rules and regulations. Even worse, when such rules and regulations were not strongly effective, some of the rules were evaded by the universities without the MUA's knowledge. Such top-down prescriptions cannot guarantee quality. The universities found ways to escape from such rigid rules in order to serve their own interests. The MUA was accustomed to the 'regulative' role rather than the 'supervision' role. These emerging demands were in contrast to the nature of the Thai higher education system, which has long been embedded in the bureaucracy (Varunee, 1990: 251; MUA, 2003: 32-36; Pad, 2005: 81).

Despite its statement in the 1999 National Education Act that the MUA's new role was to move from regulation to supervision, creating autonomous universities (Krissanapong, 2002: 3), the MUA, currently OHEC, still retained its former style of administration. From the promulgation of the National Education Act in 1999 to the present, the top agenda of the MUA has been related to the quality assessment. On this matter, however, OHEC could not guarantee improvements in the universities (Rattana, 2015: 128). The criticisms of OHEC's quality assessment system were considerable, ranging from its bureaucratic process, which featured too many meetings, documents and people, to additional academic work and rigid, inflexible rules (Rattana, 2015: 161).

The quality assessment tools and the supervisory role of the OHEC remain important and large. OHEC has the authority to manage and promote higher education on the basis of academic freedom and excellence, for example, by recommending the establishment, dissolution, amalgamation, upgrading, and elimination of higher education institutions and monitoring, inspecting and evaluating outcomes of

higher education management (Varaporn, 2006: 188). However, state's administrators often said that the OHEC had no authority to become involved with the universities' internal matters, since the OHEC had delegated all the works to the university council of each university (*Bangkok Post*, 27 January 2017). Consequently, the OHEC was able to identify many problems in the universities without realizing that OHEC must also take some responsibility for the incompetence of Thai higher education. It was now 18 years of practice since the National Education Act was promulgated in 1999, and the result of the reform seems to be malfunctioning. The performance of the responsible unit at the state's level shows that it has been incapable of practicing the 'state supervision' role in a way that would establish qualitative education.

The underlying problem appeared to be the long-established interests of the Thai bureaucracy. Existing pattern of bureaucratic mindset continue to persist in this government unit. The major constraint in this transitional period is grounded in the bureaucracy's ineffective structure and embedded norms.

University's level

A common problem has also occurred inside Thai public universities. In the Thai higher education context, the blurred relationship between universities and the market needs to take into account that the universities have not engaged with truly competitive capitalism.

In addition to the controversial situation of public universities wishing to be done with the bureaucratic system, the individual academic bureaucrats were not motivated to accept the status of employees. At the moment, the number of academic staff who hold bureaucratic status has gradually declined by retirement; those who entered the universities after 1999 national education bill were only given the status of employee's. The current number of about 60 per cent of university lecturers are employed as employees, and the remaining 40 per cent are civil servants (*Bangkok Post*, 20 November 2016). In spite of the fact that the university council charter provides a channel for individual lecturers who have civil servants' status to choose either to retain bureaucratic status or opt for university employee's status, most of them chose to retain the bureaucratic status. In addition, the parallel system of personal management is considered awkward, with two types of personnel working on the same job with different compensations (Krissanapong, 2001: 6). This situation is in accordance with Sakda's (1996: 16) view that, "while there have been complaints about salaries, inadequate financing, and lack of autonomy, so far none of the existing public universities have pushed hard enough to leave the bureaucratic system".

One public university discussed the future of the university under multiple challenges in the Thai higher education system, especially on the issue of declining number of students:

> "As long as we are part of the government, we will be alright; I have never seen any government sector being bankrupted. Under certain circumstances, we might earn less, but if we stick with the self-sufficiency philosophy, the university will definitely be able to pass all these challenges". (Conversation, March 15, 2017).

The above discussion encapsulated the conservative mind as well as the wish to retain the status quo, which the university administrator chose to stick with. Most of the academic bureaucrats tend to believe that administering universities in the former pattern and style was better, in this sense, being embedded in bureaucratic norms and values. It would be difficult for universities to bring about fundamental changes. This finding has to be understood by relating back to the historical period, when the benefits that Thai academic bureaucrats gained from the system included prestige, stable tenure, limited oppositional forces and exemption from assessment. These reflected the inabilities of the bureaucrats to see beyond their narrowly defined self-interests (see Chai-Anan, 1989: 337; Wright, 1991; Pasuk, 1999: 9). The deep attachment to their *kharatchakarn* status bore witness to the cultural norms prevalent within Thai public universities.

Paradoxically, however, the concept of 'commercialization' has gradually entered into the Thai university sphere since the period of 1980s. Inside public universities there was a part that runs like a private company. There have been a number of courses for which universities charge full-fee, normally around ten times more than that of regular programs. Most universities rely very much on this 'special' income from these 'special' programs (Welch, 2011: 110). Since the sixth plan, the state allowed universities to generate their own income by offering the profitable 'special' programs. Both public and private universities, to a great extent, had the opportunity to open their own courses to meet market demands and be able to generate their own income. One academic commented on, "the opening of profitable 'special' (commercial) programs and recruiting more students, while facilities and lecturer numbers remain the same. This unavoidably affects the quality of education" (Suluck, 2013). This quotation is true especially if the programs were opened based on commercial rationales, and there was a tendency that the quality of the courses would be undermined (Welch, 2011; Asian Development Bank, 2012).

The income to each university from these extra courses is large. The revenue would normally be shared within universities, ranging from the program's administrative committee to the individual lecturers and university staff. This means that they received other sources of income apart from their actual monthly salary. For some lecturers, this special money exceeds their salary, and that motivates them to teach extra hours in order to gain the extra pay. Teaching duties can be as much as 16 hours per week. Research suffered under such conditions, as teaching duties overwhelmed the creation of new knowledge (Welch, 2011: 91). These benefits make the quality issues very complicated. Many lecturers enjoyed freedom without responsibilities and accountabilities (Krissanapong, 2002: 6). The self-interest of individuals came before the public interest.

At the moment, Thai university lecturers are affected by the stricter new set of curriculum standards: each individual must be qualified, and continuously produce research and academic works (Varaporn, 2006: 203). Within the liberalization era, it is important that universities and teaching staff need to be self-regulated, as autonomy and accountability are considered two sides of the same coin (Sukanya, 2001: 476). The current situation portrays a struggle of universities and different individuals to survive and find strategies to cope with such high demands. However, it seems that under current conditions the acceptance of market forces is unlikely to lead these universities to agree to fundamental changes in their internal structure and culture.

Regarding the autonomous system, the university council needs to be strengthened, as they represent the government and the public interest (Krissanapong, 2002: 6). Each council consists of around 20-30 members who attend monthly meetings and are chosen by a selection committee. Most of the members are usually outsiders, including the chair of the council. At the moment, there remains a problem of reciprocal interests between the university council and university administrators. It has been claimed that the university council in Thailand is operated on a 'you scratch my back, I scratch yours' basis. Decisions on university matters tend to be based on these personal ties, rather than acting as an

accountability unit to check and balance university administration (*Matichon online*, 5 February, 2015; *Bangkok Post,* 20 November 2016). This internal relationship adds further complexities to universities' issues.

Although the process of reform to improve that structure and culture is still under way, the objectives of the early period of reform have not yet been achieved. The OHEC was an ineffective overseer of the quality control process due to its bureaucratic character. Thai public universities are situated between enjoying bureaucratic status and benefiting from the market. On the one hand, university lecturers are attached to the bureaucratic values of prestige and security; on the other hand, they are motivated by purely economic interests. Torn between these incompatible benefits, it is difficult for them to contemplate fundamental change.

University Students

University students had a powerful role during the movements in 1973 and 1976. Their actions represented social demands towards changes. However, students faded away when the military-civilian government took office after the massacre of 1976. A number of activist students escaped to the jungle, joining the communist insurgents. However, as socio-economic development increased, the students' forces became weak (Morell and Chai-Anan, 1981). As time went by, from 1986 onwards, the country was moving towards the rising demand in the industrial and manufacturing sectors. Thai universities were required to produce competent graduates to work in various sectors such as exports, industry and manufacturing (Pasuk and Baker, 1998: 6), and to produce knowledge-based research (Chai-anan, 1994: 49-50). At that time, higher education was thought of as merely providing advantages in the labor market, and students became interested in business and ceased to adopt a radical role. they no longer understand the underlying problems of society as they had in the 1970s. Higher education is now considered to be a means of gaining better employment and material advancement and to improve social mobility (Sakda, 1996: 15).

Most of students who enter the higher education system come from upper and middle class backgrounds. It has been stated that 90 percent of university students are from upper and middle class families (*Matichon*, 28 January 2003). It is interesting to note that when the constitution required at least a bachelor's degree to contest an election, this measure excluded around 90 per cent of the total population, over 95 per cent in the rural area, and over 99 per cent in the agricultural sector (Pasuk and Baker, 2008: 118). This means that few individuals from the lower social classes could pass the higher education selective entry process needed to enter the universities, nor could they afford such an education. A university education is one of the most important indicators of middle class status (Ockey, 1999; Ockey, 2004: 154; Welch, 2011: 87). This inequality of access to higher education has widened the gap between the rich and the poor and reflecting the exclusive role of higher education in serving particular elites (Surichai, 2002: 7-17; Pad, 2013: 672).

There are different types of students in higher education institutions. On the one hand, there are those who stand up to request greater justice and fuller participation. For example, students in various universities raised concerns about the issue of university privatization. These activist students requested more transparency in the privatization process and asked for greater student participation in university affairs (*Matichon online*, 7 May 2015; *The Isaan record*, 5 September 2015). Throughout the period, there were student activist movements on many political issues. These activities were, however, limited in scope.

On the other hand, there are students who do not have much concern about that particular political topic, as they enter the university only to obtain a degree. In the same way as in the historical period, but in different context, Thai students see the university degree as a ladder to upgrade their social and economic status. Many of them see universities as a place to gain personal networking and connection (Varaporn and et.al., 1996: 63). They do not care much about the quality of teaching and learning provided by the programs. Interviewing Thai students and foreign students on the quality of teaching and education in international programs in Thai universities, there are different responses. While the foreign students care much more about the quality of the teaching and ask the lecturers many questions in class, Thai students tend to be relaxed and prefer those lecturers who give them better grade results (Pad, 2005: 264).

It also needs to be understood that these Thai upper and middle class students might have privileges and opportunities to such a great extent that the deeper concern for the quality of their learning can be neglected. Higher education in Thailand involves predominantly upper and middle class students, and those from well-to-do families have more opportunities to rely on cram schools, international schools or programs, and foreign education (ICFE Monitor, 2015). In this sense, the needs of upper and middle class students are currently in a transitional period, and it will take time for them to place greater demands on the higher education sector that could lead to fundamental changes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Thai higher education was initiated by and for the benefit of bureaucratic elites in the early period. That provided the embedded bureaucratic norms and values which became the strong foundation of Thai higher education system. At the time when market mechanisms had opened the political space to all walks of life and transformed Thailand into a more pluralistic society, the Thai higher education system was forced to adjust itself to allow different key players to participate in the scene. The above description and analysis reflect the internal dynamics of different key actors who came to be involved in the higher education system in both the historical period and from the 1970s onwards. However, the tensions between the countervailing forces represented by politicians, technocrats, students, and bureaucrats in their new roles did not promote effective change. It only prompted these interest groups to follow their own agendas regardless of the rule of law. Thai higher education became an area of conflict and consensus for key related forces. This fragmentation of interest groups created a

jigsaw puzzle, which is an apt metaphor for the fundamental problems of Thai higher education. The necessary changes will require a great deal of additional time.

Thai higher education is now in the 18th year of its reform process. The actual developments have rarely been recognized. As long as Thai politics fluctuates back and forth from the 'bureaucratic polity' to the 'neo-pluralist' and 'institutionalist' approaches, higher education will follow the same pattern. The situation in Thailand under these theoretical approaches has not reflected a promise to change the fundamental structure of Thai higher education. So far, Thai higher education has only benefited the elite minority and it has provided little impact on wider public interests.

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