Public Sector Professionalism in Thailand

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Introduction

The literature on national development and the public sector in Thailand has evolved considerably since Fred Rigg's *Thailand: The Modernization of a Bureaucratic Polity* and William Siffin's *The Thai Bureaucracy: Institutional Change and Development* were published. This evolution has been associated with the development of concepts and a greater appreciation of the ways in which the public sector contributes to national development.

Throughout this evolution, increased professionalism within the public sector has been seen as one way to enhance the administrative system's capacity to help achieve development goals. Enhanced professionalism in the public sector is particularly important because it impacts upon the quality of public administration. The quality of public administration is critical because it affects all aspects of development carried out by the public sector and by much of the private sector, and is one factor which can show considerable variation within the particular administrative system.

Despite its importance, public sector professionalism has been the focus of a relatively small body of literature. Within this body of literature, most attention has been paid to defining concepts and establishing professional standards of behavior. Empirical research into the general area of public sector professionalism is rare, and within developing countries almost nonexistent.

Public sector professionalism is a many faceted concept. The literature focused on public sector professionalism in the U.S. has identified social background as one factor affecting individuals' levels of professionalism. The literature on "representative bureaucracy" is related to this issue. A major debate within this body of literature is centered on whether or not the development of a representative bureaucracy, i.e., a bureaucracy which more closely reflects the class, gender, and/or regional composition of a society enhances governmental performance. Those who argue against representative bureaucracy assert that females, and the male offspring of rural peasants and urban labor classes lack the social backgrounds to adequately prepare them for roles in the civil service. They further argue that traditional administrative elites, i.e., males from wealthy, urban, households headed by political/bureaucratic elite fathers, have the backgrounds which enable them to operate effectively within the public sector.

Very little literature is focused on professionalism in less developed countries
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(LDCs). This is particularly the case in Thailand where no such studies have been conducted. While there have been no studies of public sector professionalism in Thailand, a few authors have investigated the sociological attributes of Thai civil servants. Most notable among this group are H.D. Evers and T.H. Silcock, Likhit Diravegin, and Tin Prachyapruit.

Evers and Silcock describe the selection, composition, and development of the bureaucratic elite in Thailand. In their study, relationships among groups of Thai elites were explored, and the impacts of these relationships on economic development were measured. In Likhit's 1974 survey of the higher civil service in Thailand, no attempt was made to relate bureaucratic composition to economic development. The influence of social background on development orientation was examined in Tin's 1982 survey.

This paper aims to investigate the impact of social background on the development of public sector professionalism within the context of Thailand. Thailand is chosen as a case study for several reasons. First, Thailand, like many LDCs, is attempting to re-orient its development strategy, particularly in terms of the role played by government officials. This has been a major thrust of The Fifth National Economic and Social Development Plan. The Sixth Five-Year Plan will likely continue this re-orientation by focusing more heavily on human resource development, and increased efficiency and equity in the nation's development.

Second, Thailand exhibits many characteristics which are similar to, or at least not radically dissimilar from other LDCs. Thailand, with a GNP per capita of US$820 ranks 55th among 94 lower and middle income countries. Like most LDCs, Thailand incorporates the development of both public and private sectors into its national plans. The Thai bureaucracy, like that found in a majority of LDCs, is marked by extreme centralization and a lack of responsiveness to the public. However, public administration in Thailand is viewed in many instances as superior to that in a large number of many other LDCs. For instance, the Regional Employment Generation Program in Northern Thailand is seen as a successful example of decentralization whereby local officials and citizens participate in decision making. Moreover, the Provincial Electricity Authority, the Government's rural electrification monopoly, is viewed by many observers as an organization which other LDCs would do well to emulate. Therefore, Thailand is not extraordinary among the large group of low and middle income countries, although, in terms of the strength of its economic development and the degree of private sector participation in the economy the country appears to be stronger than most LDCs.

Finally, the authors have considerable experience with development administration in general and Thai public administration in particular.

The improvement of public administration is a major development goal of the Fifth Plan. Particular emphasis is placed on administrative decentralization, with administrative responsiveness to public needs and demands being a paramount consideration. The ultimate aim of the government's decentralization effort is to mobilize human resources at the local level for national development. This approach requires a bureaucracy which is staffed by public administrators who must be better skilled and more responsive to public needs than were their predecessors. This assessment is supported by the World Bank which notes "... it is imperative that certain efficiency and service are observed, and that the viewpoint of the citizenry is taken into account".