

Women's Political Participation in Thailand*

Orapin Sopchokchai**

INTRODUCTION

Politics is an interplay of power. As conceptualized by Aristotle (2535): "Politics refers to activities that stem from roles and behaviors of groups of individuals for the purpose of governing society... Exercise of political power is justified only if it is in the name of and for the public."

Accordingly, politicians and individuals with political power have roles and duties to justly allocate resources among different stakeholders in society. In a democratic society, political participation is not justified unless members of society are given equal opportunities to exercise their power in a process of resource allocation. As men and women have different needs and viewpoints, it is important that women take part in political processes to express their needs and protect the rights of women. Along these lines of thought, equal right to political participation of both genders is necessary.

The issue of women and politics has focused the world's attention since the United Nations declared 1975 as International Women's Year, and extended it to the Decade of Women in Development (1976-1985). Promotion of women's participation in social and political decision-making processes has since been incorporated in agendas of international discussions and agreement preparations. Studies on women's political participation have been conducted in various countries.

Existing studies yield similar results that the overall level of women's political participation remains low. Although women constitute half of the world's population and represent half of the eligible voters in democratic societies, only 12 percent and 6 percent of the female population sits in parliaments and holds Cabinet positions respectively. Women are found to be more politically active at the local and community level; nevertheless, women's political participation at this level lags behind that of men (United Nations Development Programme 1996).

In the case of Thailand, the level of women's political participation is lower than average percentages in both developed and developing countries, including many Asian nations. In Sweden, Norway and Finland, there are 40.4 percent, 39.4 percent and 33.5 percent of female members of parliament respectively. Female members of parliament in China, Malaysia and India account for 21 percent, 11.1 percent and 8 percent respectively. In comparison, in Thailand, only 5.6 percent of the members of parliament are female (United Nations Development Programme 1996). It is thus evident that encouragement and promotion for higher political participation of Thai women is much needed.

This article presents an overall picture of women's political participation in Thailand at both national and local levels. Brief historical and cultural backgrounds are provided, and the paper also depicts the present situation of women's political participation in Thailand.

BACKGROUND OF WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN THAI SOCIETY

Cultural Background

In ancient societies, physical strength primarily determined one's survival (Aristotle 2540). For this reason, the stronger physical build of men rendered the male gender higher positions, and societies normally placed higher value on men than women. This held true for both Eastern and Western societies. Under Roman Law, wives were possessions of husbands; they could be punished, divorced, sold or killed at the husband's will.

Chinese families preferred sons to daughters as they believed daughters would finally become possessions of the husband's family. This cultural belief has led to an inferior status and limited rights of Chinese women (Aristotle 2531). Similarly, several beliefs and cultural practices in India have restricted women's rights. For instance, marriage dowries are provided by the bride's family. Accordingly, sons are preferred in Indian families. As in Chinese culture, married Indian women became possessions of the husband's family and had to serve the husband's family as a result of their inferior status.

The Indian and Chinese cultures have had a strong influence on attitudes and cultural beliefs in Southeast Asia. These two cultures, in particular Hindu and Brahman beliefs, have shaped Thai values and the status of women. In ancient Thai society, men were expected and accepted as heads of the family, while women's roles revolved around taking care of the household. Political roles were thus primarily confined to men, a practice which is believed to have stemmed from Brahman and Hindu influence (Juree 1993). As a consequence, Thai boys and girls received different training. In upper class families, sons received professional training, such as military and administration, while daughters were sent to be raised in the royal court to be trained in etiquette and the skills of "fine ladies," such as the arts of cooking, embroidery, and fruit carving. This strict separation of roles has led to different expectations, status, and, finally, values which society bestowed on the two genders.

Although history provides a number of examples where Thai women played significant political and administrative roles, legal evidence shows that Thai women were inferior to men in many ways. Thai laws in early times, for instance, stated that women were possessions of fathers and husbands, who could rightfully sell, pawn or give out wives and daughters at will. According to the law, Thai women had no right to manage property and wealth. In addition, in the case of divorce, men received two-thirds of the wealth, the women the remainder (Juree 1993).

Although these laws have mostly been amended since the beginning of the Chakri dynasty over 200 years ago, and equality between genders has developed, traces of inequality remain in the thinking and practices of society which in turn influence the role and status of Thai women nowadays.

Historical Background

A large number of beliefs in Thai culture have formed and reinforced different sets of values and expectations among men and women, which has resulted in social disparities between the genders. Unlike some other nations, such as the United States from 1848 to 1960, however, movements for women's rights in Thailand are rarely confrontational. The status and social perception of

women gradually altered as Western influences infiltrated Thai society. The period of change can be set at about the time of the reigns of King Rama IV and King Rama VI toward the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. In 1888, the first woman newspaper, "Naree Rom," was published and was followed by others. "Kulasatree," for instance, was the second newspaper for women. It presented current social and political events as well as articles of women's interests. "Sayam Yupadee" promoted women's interests in politics, including a series on this theme in 13 consecutive editions (jī'á;éÇ 2531).

As earlier mentioned, prior to the exposure to Western influence, education of Thai girls, especially those born to upper class families, often took place in the inner court of the royal family. In 1901, the first girl's school was established. Twenty-six years later, the first Thai female freshmen enrolled at Chulalongkorn University, the first university in Thailand. With an open window to formal education, women had an opportunity to be professionally trained. Thailand started to witness upper class women with formal education become involved in social and philanthropic activities. The formation of women's groups in this manner crystallized as a form of women's political participation. Interaction with Western countries during this period also introduced concepts of democracy, equal rights and liberty to Thai society. These new concepts and philosophies served as a firm ground upon which notions of women's political participation grew. Society began to perceive the roles and status of women differently. Most importantly, women themselves started to conceptualize their roles and status with a different mindset.

Women's organizations and movements in their early stages have not been systematically documented. However, studies show many incidents whereby women's organizations took active roles in pressing for equal rights for men and women. A prime example is the equal right to vote and to register as an electoral candidate endorsed in Thailand's first Constitution in 1932. This was at a time when many other states remained dictatorial or curbed women's political rights. Throughout waves of general elections, military dictatorships, civilian administrations and people's revolutions, not one of the 16 Thai Constitutions has revoked these equal political rights (¹šàÂÒÇì Á.».».).

Increased equality between men and women was attained in the 1974 Constitution, the result of pressure from a movement promoting the status of women. A provisional clause allowed two years for amendment of existing laws in conflict with the Constitution. Accordingly, many ministerial rules and regulations were changed to comply with the concept of equal rights of men and women. These included limiting female military officers to the rank of lieutenant-colonel (Ministry of Defense); barring female officials from the public attorney position (Ministry of Interior); prohibiting married female officials from applying for passports without the consent of their spouses, and barring female officials from becoming ambassadors (Ministry of Foreign Affairs). Pressure from many other women's organizations has led to amendments and the scrapping of unjust and discriminatory laws, as well as the enforcement of laws which guarantee women's rights. Examples include the revocation of the law that allowed a husband's polygamy, the enforcement of monogamy in 1935, and the enforcement of the law entitling women to 90 days of maternity leave in 1993.

THE SITUATION TODAY

Thai women today enjoy higher economic, social and political status than their ancestors. Women's organizations continue their movements and activities to promote the status of women and to eradicate existing social and political inequalities between genders. Women's organizations today have expanded their network to cover not only women of urban and upper class families who receive formal education, but also women at the grassroots level and women of the same profession. These include the Female Farmers' Group, the Group of Northern Female Leaders, the Group of Women and Youth of Lamphoon, and Regional Groups of Housewives. These organizations participate in movements to demand women's rights in such issues as labor oppression/injustice, labor welfare and safety at the workplace, poverty, and injustice in allocation of resources. Apart from focusing on women's issues, women's organizations have cooperated with other organizations in such matters as fights against social injustice, protests against dam construction and demands for agricultural land rights. Many women's issues are included in the demands of the Assembly of the Poor.

Women's organizations and their movements are considered a form of political participation. Political participation at this level includes other forms of gatherings, such as protests or rallies to voice political concerns. The most passive level of political participation takes the form of casting one's vote, while the most active refers to direct participation in political activities, e.g., working for political parties and holding political positions (¹šàÂÒÇì Á.».».; ç

ÑµµÔÂÔ Á.».».). Women in Thailand are active in the first and second level of political participation: voting and organizing political movements. [Table 1](#) shows the number of female and male voters in the most recent general election of November 17, 1996. The result shows a higher proportion of female to male voters, or 52.09 percent as opposed to 47.91 percent. With regard to direct political participation, despite more conducive political, social and legal contexts and the rising trend of women's participation, direct political participation by women remains low.

WOMEN'S DIRECT POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN THAILAND

The limited scope of active and direct political participation on the part of Thai women can be attributed to cultural and historical reasons as discussed above. The separation of the roles and duties of men and women in society today, though less defined, has perpetuated the perception of politics being a man's affair. The social acceptance and appreciation of "fine" ladies in terms of their abilities in managing family matters and household chores are deeply rooted in the thinking of both Thai men and women. Apart from the fact that social expectations and acceptance leave women little room for active and direct political participation, it is women, believing that their duties lie primarily in the household, who leave "outside matters" in the care of men. Women's indifference to these "outside matters," including politics, has deprived women of continuing interests, knowledge and experience, and has led to their lack of participation in these areas.

This section discusses the situation of direct political participation of women in Thailand. This includes standing as electoral candidates and holding high-ranking administrative positions that allow them to take part in decision-making and policy formulating processes. Active women's political participation both at the national and local levels will be examined.

Women's Political Participation at the National Level

Women's political participation at the national level includes becoming members of parliament, senators, members of the Constitutional Drafting Assembly, and Cabinet members.

Female Members of Parliament

Although Thai women and men were granted equal rights to political participation in the first Constitution in 1932, it took 17 years for the first Thai women to enter the Parliament (¹šàÂÒÇì Á.».».). On June 5, 1949, Mrs. Orapin Chaiyakan, was elected to the House of Representatives in a by-election to fill a vacancy after a general election in 1948. Female members of parliament have been elected in all general elections since 1952, but the number lags far behind that of male members. In the most recent general election on November 17, 1996, for instance, 371 men and 22 women, or 5.59 percent, were elected to Parliament. It is noticeable that for the past two decades, however, that more women have shown an interest in becoming members of parliament. Female

candidates accounted for approximately 10 percent of all candidates in the general elections in 1969, and from 1983 to 1996. [Table 2](#) shows the number of male and female candidates and elected members of parliament in general elections from 1933 to 1996.

Female Senators

Prior to the present 1996 Constitution, which stipulates that senators must be elected, Thai senators were appointed from representatives of various fields. The present Senate remains appointed under the term of the previous constitution. The Senate was first introduced to Thailand in 1946. No record exists on the proportion of female to male senators between 1946 and 1974. However, it is documented that there were three female senators prior to 1974, namely Khunying Leka Apaiwongse (1949-1951), Khunying La-iaed Pibulsonggram (1949-1951) and Khunying Raem Promrobo Boonyaprasob (1957). In 1974, nine women were appointed to the Senate.

Throughout Thailand's political history, it is evident that female senators have accounted for a small proportion of all senators, particularly from 1979 to 1992. In 1996, 21 women were appointed to the Senate. This number is by far the highest of all female senators present at one time, which can be said to be the result of pressure from women's groups. Still, at 8 percent, this number in 1996 ranks lower than the average percentage in all developing countries, according to the United Nations. [Table 3](#) shows the number of male and female senators from 1975 to 1996.

Female Members of the Constitution Drafting Assembly

The Constitutional Drafting Assembly (CDA) was established during the Banharn Silpa-archa administration. The mission of this ad hoc assembly was to draft a constitution with input from a wide range of people aimed at benefiting society through political reform and by addressing social and political ills. These include vote-buying, the quality of members of parliament, the lack of efficient checks and balances, and issues of basic human rights. The CDA comprised 99 members. Seventy-six were elected provincial representatives, each member representing a province. The other 23 members were nominated from experts in different fields. Provincial representatives entered the CDA via indirect elections. The first round was organized nationwide on December 14, 1996. Candidates registered in the first round elected 10 representatives from each of their provinces. The second round of the election was conducted by the House of Representatives and the Senate, at which stage the 10 nominated representatives were screened down to one.

The CDA election was well-received by women in all provinces. As many as 6,744 women, or 34.9 percent of all candidates, enrolled in the first round of the election. Although a number of candidates in this first round had no strong intention of becoming CDA members—they primarily aimed at obtaining the right to vote for the provincial representative—the high proportion of female candidates signifies a big step toward their participation in the political process in Thailand. [Table 4](#) shows women's participation in the CDA.

As shown in [Table 4](#), a total of 64 women were elected as provincial representatives. Six were selected as CDA members. No female experts were appointed.

Female Cabinet Members

Through six decades of democracy, Thailand has had 53 Cabinets. The first woman to participate was a member of the 39th Cabinet under the Thanin Kraivichien administration (1976-1977), 44 years after the first Thai constitution. Only 11 women have attained ministerial positions since then. [Table 5](#) shows female Cabinet members since 1932 to the present.

Women's Political Participation at the Local Level

Political participation at the local level involving elections takes different forms, subject to the development of the individual local political bodies. In this article, local government is categorized into three groups, namely:

- Local government at the urban community level, i.e., Municipality, Sanitary District (*sukapiban*²), Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) and the City of Pattaya
- Local government at the provincial level, i.e., Provincial Administration Organization
- Local government at the community level i.e., *Tambon*³ (Sub-district) and Village

Women's political participation in the central and local governments is equally important as they should participate in decision-making processes at all levels. Moreover, local government is an important forum that allows local people to join forces in protecting their rights, stimulating development and ensuring equal distribution of resources.

Women's Political Participation at the Urban Community Level

In 1956, power was first decentralized from the central government to the urban community level. In this year, Bangkok became the country's first sanitary district. It was later upgraded to a municipality and finally to its present status as the BMA. At present, urban community administration in Thailand takes 4 forms, i.e., the BMA, the City of Pattaya, Municipality and Sanitary District. Studies show that women are politically active at the urban community level. The level of their participation in the four forms of local administration differs as follows.

1) Bangkok Metropolitan Administration

Bangkok was promoted to an autonomous local administration in 1973. The Bangkok governor, members of the Bangkok Metropolitan Assembly and members of district assemblies are elected by the citizens of Bangkok. The Bangkok Metropolitan Assembly serves as the city's legislative branch, while the 38 district assemblies monitor the administration of Bangkok districts.

Candidates for the position of Bangkok Governor have included a number of women, for example, Khunying Kanok Samsen Ville. All, however, have been unsuccessful. With regards to the Bangkok Metropolitan Assembly, nine women were elected on March 6, 1994, accounting for 16.36 percent of the 55 members.

2) City of Pattaya

No women have been elected as Pattaya City Mayor.⁴

3) Municipality

First established in 1933, municipalities refer to urban communities with an annual income of more than 5 million baht. At present, there are 143 municipalities nationwide. Records show that the first female deputy mayor, Mrs. Lamoon Singkalavanij, was elected in 1936, and in 1966, Mrs. Pison

