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The Asia Foundation

## NOTES FROM THE FIELD

### Dark Reality to Vote Buying in Thailand

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By Asia Foundation staff member\*

Having served as a short-term international observer for the general election in Thailand earlier this month on July 3, I unfortunately became somewhat of an expert in the dark arts of vote buying.

As one of 60 observers from the Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL) deployed around the country, I spent eight days in Chonburi province in the lead-up to election day. Located just a little east of Bangkok, Chonburi is home to Kamnan Poh, the notorious godfather who once declared, “I used to have enemies in Chonburi, but they all died.” Though Kamnan Poh is currently in hiding – wanted on corruption charges – there is no denying the continued influence of his clan: one of his sons is head of the provincial administration, the other is mayor of the tourist resort town, Pattaya. Just two months before this election, the family set up a new political party called the **Palang Chon** (or Power of Chonburi) party. They pulled off a staggering victory, winning six out of Chonburi’s eight constituency seats and one party list candidacy, and thereby becoming a key member of the new coalition government.



An election official watches over a ballot box as voters fill out their ballots. Photo by Pauline Tweedie.

In the days following the election, however, Thailand’s Election Commission has been deluged with over 1,920 complaints of vote buying and other electoral irregularities. Judging from the variety of vote-buying methods I came across in Chonburi, the large number of cases nationwide is not surprising.

In its most elemental form, vote buying taps into local lines of patronage. Kamnan Poh and his family have been prominent in the province for over three decades and many people are loyal to them. “If they win, it will

mean having people from our home in parliament and we know they won't forget to look after us," one local told me. He also expected his voter loyalty to be repaid in kind: "If they win big in our area, I'm sure there will be a big party to celebrate and definitely some cash handed out, too. ..."

Votes can also be bought with hard cash, paid in advance. The current rate in Chonburi starts at 300 baht (around \$10) and goes up to as much as 3,000 baht (\$100). In Thailand, this practice is as old as the electoral process itself and reaches a crescendo the night before an election or, as Thais call it, *kheun maa hawn* (the night of the howling dogs).

Another way for a party to increase its odds of winning is to conduct reverse vote buying. By purchasing the ID cards of voters who are confirmed supporters of a particular party, the buyer can count one less vote for its rivals, as citizens without a valid ID card are not allowed to vote.

The challenge with vote buying, though, is to ensure that voters who take your money will definitely vote for you once they're inside the privacy of the polling booth. In previous elections, voters have been asked to photograph their marked ballots using mobile phone cameras but phones are now banned in polling stations. One method currently in use in Chonburi is to obtain a copy of the voter's house registration certificate; many villagers I spoke with are unconvinced of the secrecy of their ballot and are afraid that canvassers can use their house registration to check who they voted for.

The most cost-effective method for getting votes seems to be through intimidation. On election day, we kept an eye out for people loitering around the polling booth who might be there to threaten voters. By being present at the booth, party representatives send a clear message: don't forget to vote for us, we're watching you.

Further assurance that vote-buying efforts will pay off comes from being able to influence or control the local Election Commissions. In one Chonburi district, a former committee member told me that only two out of nine members could be described as neutral. It also helps to have friends in the police force; I heard about three villagers who tried to report a vote-buying incident only to be warned against acting as witnesses by their local policemen.

With Thailand's central Election Commission **currently investigating** hundreds of electoral fraud cases and all eyes focused on accusations against Pheu Thai, the winning party, numerous politicians involved in vote buying will inevitably slip through the net. Chonburi is a prime case study in how electoral systems can be effectively subverted by local power brokers. A lawyer I met there gave me a succinct synopsis of the process: "It's what happens when gangsters become politicians."

*\*The author is a writer for The Asia Foundation in Thailand. Due to privacy concerns around election monitoring, the author's real name has been left out. The views and opinions expressed here are those of the individual author and not those of The Asia Foundation.*

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