

Book Review

**Performing Political Identity: The Democrat Party
in Southern Thailand.**

By **MARC ASKEW**. Silkworm Books, 2008.

Review by Pattana Kitiarsa*

Southeast Asian Studies Programme, National University of Singapore, Singapore

General impression on Thailand's political parties is that most of them are short-lived and lack of distinctive political ideology. Their existence is mostly seen as steppingstone for politically ambitious "big men", who wish to achieve their dream through the less-than-effective parliamentary system. Most parties are founded by and thus geared to serve the interests of influential Bangkok-based elites, especially well-connected retired military generals, high-ranking bureaucrats, and business tycoons. Thai political parties are run by small groups of people with power connections and money, which is either generated through the party leaders' private wealth or donated by top business tycoons from a handful of Sino-Thai corporate families.

In many aspects, the Democrat Party appears to stand out from the above-mentioned impression of parliamentary politics in Thailand. Askew's book is a timely publication, given some recent political crisis and problematic democratization in the country. The book is among rare ethnographically grounded studies of how political parties in the country have actually worked through the electoral politics. It is an ethnographic account of "Thailand's electoral politics as a symbolic and thus culturally informed process" (p. xiv). It provides some articulated explanations to the questions of how

* *Corresponding author.*

E-mail address: seapk@nus.edu.sg.

the Democrat Party maintains its ascendancy in Southern Thailand or particularly, how it so tenaciously denied the Thai Rak Thai's challenges in both local and national elections in 2004 and 2005.

In this book, the uniqueness of Southern Thailand's political exceptionalism is persuasively disclosed and retold. Askew unveils the mystery of the Democrat Party's long ascendancy and domination in Songkhla and the South. He argues that the Democrat Party's success depends considerably on its wily campaigning technique, multi-level electoral resources, and symbolic advantages. The Democrat leaders and candidates are master performers in the electoral socio-dramas with superb campaigning skills and decisive stroke. They have persistently cultivated political bonds and identities among the Southern voters "...through the rhetorical and symbolic seduction of ordinary voters and the astute management of allegiances among key followers" (p. xi). Consistently branding itself as the party for the Southerners with strong ideology (*udomkan*), the Democrats have identified and confirmed positive moral and cultural ideals highly valued by its voters. Some examples of such moral and cultural ideals include unconditioned loyalty and trust to one's *phuak* or group, *barami* (morally infused repute generated by good deeds), *kwangkhwang* (well connected, expansive, generous) and *chai nakleng* (having the heart of a *nakleng*).

Askew's argument is built upon observation and insight which he gained through some long-term, engaged anthropological fieldworks in Songkhla Province between 2003 and 2005. His approach of "hang[ing] around with a purpose" (p. xiii) guides him through eventful series of political elections. It has also placed him in an unusual fieldwork position to write some deep and sensitive accounts of political performing culture and its electoral machineries in the South. The way he deals with a key portion of Thai-language scholarship on Southern Thai folklore and some related debates on the discourse of Southern Thainess is particularly impressive. He reconstructs one of his major conceptual frameworks from a local cultural understanding of political *phuak* affiliation as a model of and model for the symbolic and pragmatic interpretations of political culture in Southern Thailand.

Askew's intensive utilization of the socioculturally specific concept of "*phuak*" needs some critical consideration. The *phuak* relationship is an inclusive cultural construct, conveying multiple meanings such as, same-group informal belonging, sociocultural bond and identities, hierarchically-structured political affiliation, and intimate everyday vocabularies. In the Southern Thai political contexts, *phuak* or *phakphuak* and *phuakphong* could mean cliques or groups of people sharing the same locality and affiliation under certain organized canvasser (*hua khanaen*), general followers/voters, to fictive and blood-tied kin people. The obvious strength of using *phuakphong* (I personally prefer this term or *samak phakphuak* to just the too generic and broad classifier of *phuak*) as a conceptual model is that it provides some nuanced, subtle, and grounded alternative explanations to many existing theories on Thai politics such as, the polarized urban-rural "two democracies" proposed by Anek Laothamatas (1996), the old-fashioned money politics and "big men" argued by many political scientists and the media, and the elite-centered "monarchical networks" recently suggested by McCargo (2005). It elaborates political performance and actors at the grass-root level and augurs well for the lively and active popular participation in the local, provincial, and national politics. However, *phuak* as a political concept is fuzzy and required some subjectively engaged interpretation. Essentializing *phuak* relationship is close to an adoption of primordialist stance to the study of electoral politics. *Phuak* is a very important sophisticated organization in understanding political elections, but it is not a locally or regionally specific and should be examined from certain comparative perspectives.

Askew's linguistic expertise and cultural familiarity is undeniably extraordinary and admirable. Nonetheless, both Thai and non-Thai English-speaking readers might find Askew's heavy usage of Thai terms and expressions a little too repetitive and redundancy. Although it is Askew's intention to make a maximum use of his linguistic talent to gauge into the depth of symbolic and cultural interpretation of Southern Thais' political performing identity, terms or expressions should be scaled down to a limited utilization and employed where and when necessary. In this respect, the book badly needs a glossary of Central or Southern Thai terminologies.

Some Thai-language terms and expressions are not employed to cope fully with their linguistic or cultural connotations. *Kin mueang* (eating the country or corruption) should be fully used as *kin ban kin mueang* (pp. xi, 42). *Kin mueang*, if used alone, could mean to rule or to govern in the traditional Siamese administration system when Bangkok-appointed officials were sent to assume the administrative posts upcountry. *Mai pen prachathipat* (non-Democrats) (p. 20) should be *mai chai prachathipat*. "Participation" (*suanruam*) (p. 145) should be *kan mi suanruam* (p. 145). There are also some factual errors. "Suchinda Khraphayun's coup" (p. 36) is not totally correct. The coup was staged the National Peace Keeping Council (NPKC) under the leadership of General Suchinda Khraprayun, General Issaraphong Noonpakdi, and Air Chief Marshal Kaset Rojananin. Indeed, the late General Sunthorn Khongsomphong, the Supreme Commander, was formally named as its senior leader. Churin Laksanawisit is an MP of Phang-Nga, not Phuket (p. 339). *Doi khwam sabai chai* should be *duai khwam sabai chai* (p. 95) and *thammaphiban* should be translated as good governance, not good government (p.134).

Despite the book's minor flaws, Askew must be congratulated for this innovative and ethnographically grounded study of contemporary electoral performances by a major Thai political party. He shows an in-depth and articulate interpretation of grass-root level political election culture in Southern Thailand. To date, this book is perhaps the most engaged and sophisticated studies of Thai electoral politics. It is a must-read requirement for all students of election politics in Thailand and elsewhere in Southeast Asia.