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“Playing on Relations”: Practices of Local-Level Citizenship and Inter-Ethnic Estrangement in a Southern Thai Village

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Abstract:

Since its formal incorporation into the Thai nation state in the early 20th century, the Malay-Muslim majority region of southernmost Thailand has chafed under the rule of a culturally and linguistically alien Thai state. Beginning at the turn of the 21st century, Thailand’s program of administrative decentralization may have offered a salve to this condition by empowering locally elected representatives to address the needs and solve the problems of the people. This article argues, however, that decentralized government in Thailand suffers from a number of shortcomings that limit the efficacy of “bringing the state closer to the people.” Among these shortcomings is a tendency to produce dominant chief executives (“mayors”) capable of directing the flow of power and resources through informal networks that readily bypass formal representative institutions and participatory mechanisms. In the context of ethnically diverse villages and administrative subdistricts (Tambon), the ability to participate in such informal networks can be conditioned by ethnic or religious identity. This can result in the politicization of ethnic identity following dynamics that are independent of those typically highlighted in relation to the Malay-Muslim majority south and the Thai polity in general.

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Douglas Olthof is a PhD candidate under Special Arrangements at Simon Fraser University. His research concerns the role of state institutions in the (re)production of ethnic “boundaries” and is supported by a C.D. Nelson Memorial Graduate Scholarship and a doctoral fellowship from Canada’s Social Science and Humanities Research Council. He recently completed 12 months of ethnographic field research in the conflict-affected region of southernmost Thailand.

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“Playing on Relations”: Practices of Local-Level Citizenship and Inter-Ethnic Estrangement in a Southern Thai Village

Introduction

Since the early years of the 21st century, the southernmost region of Thailand has been beset by near-daily acts of violence that, in the view of most observers, stem from an organized resistance movement against the Thai state. Analysts (e.g. Askew 2007; McCargo 2009a; Liow and Pathan 2010) typically identify the principle grievances motivating this violence to be deficits in the responsiveness, accountability and legitimacy of the Thai state. Studies spanning several decades (e.g. Fraser 1960; Surin 1985; McCargo 2009a) suggest that poor state-society relations in the region have resulted in widespread feelings of political, social and cultural alienation amongst much of the region’s Malay-speaking Muslim majority. Notwithstanding the important contributions these studies make to our understanding of the grievances undergirding the Deep South¹ conflict, however, few have addressed the significance to state-society relations of relatively recent administrative decentralization. This article takes up that task by examining relations between citizens and the decentralized local state in an ethnically diverse village in the Deep South region. It argues that the institutional design of decentralized government in Thailand renders it particularly susceptible to elite capture and that, under such conditions, religious or ethnic identity can become important factors conditioning relations between individuals and the local-level state. In this way, the present institutional design of the decentralized state in southernmost Thailand can contribute to extant patterns of inter-ethnic estrangement.

The remainder of the article proceeds in six substantive sections. The first introduces core conceptual tools including a conception of citizenship emphasizing practices and a conception of the social world informed by Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of capital, fields and habitus. The next

¹ The Deep South region is usually considered to include the provinces of Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat as well as four districts of the neighbouring province of Songkla.

section introduces the case study, situating the village under study, Bahn Lomyen² within the context of a drawn-out, slow-burning and distinctly ethno-nationalist conflict. The third section provides an overview emergence of decentralization as a policy objective in Thailand, with an emphasis on the Deep South region. The fourth section examines the question of representation in the municipal government responsible for Bahn Lomyen, primarily through reference to surveys and interviews with members of Bahn Lomyen's three distinct ethno-religious communities. The fifth section explores the issue of direct citizen participation in local government by examining the role of "civic forums" in the development planning process. Finally, the sixth section returns to the question of inter-ethnic group estrangement and thereafter concludes.

Citizenship, Identity and Capital

Following Isin and Wood (1999), this article understands citizenship to entail "*both* a set of practices (cultural, symbolic and economic) and a bundle of rights and duties (civil, political and social) that define an individual's membership in a polity" (Isin and Wood 1999: 4). This conception of citizenship builds upon the foundational work of T.H. Marshall (1963), which produced a formalistic understanding of citizenship in terms of various categories of rights. More recent scholarship, however, has tended to emphasize the practices through which individuals and groups enact membership in a political community and is typified in Brian S. Turner's definition of citizenship as "[a] set of practices (juridical, political, economic and cultural) which define a person as a competent member of society, and which as a consequence shape the flow of resources to social groups" (1993: 2). This emphasis on practices facilitates deeper analysis of the myriad dimensions of exclusion and inclusion that help shape the everyday exercise of citizenship and that are largely invisible from the perspective of codified citizenship rights (Young 1989). At the same time, however, the central importance of rights and of their more-or-less equal distribution (within the context of the inherently exclusionary category "citizen") is not to be forgotten. Citizenship is distinguishable from other forms of political subjecthood precisely because citizenship entails rights; in their absence, continued enjoyment of the benefits

² The names of the village, subdistrict and all individuals referred to in this article are pseudonyms.

of membership in a given political community becomes contingent on the will of those exercising sovereign power. While in practice there exists a complex of social and economic factors that can and do stand between citizens and the exercise of citizenship rights, in a formal sense those rights are equally available to all who qualify as citizens. This suggests that, from a democratic standpoint, the quality of a citizenship regime can be assessed to a significant extent by the degree to which the everyday practice of citizenship meets the lofty objective of universality.

As a number of scholars have pointed out, there exists an apparent tension between the universalistic aspirations of citizenship and the particularism of ethnic identity (Isin and Wood 1999). Once again, however, a shift in the conception of citizenship from the formal/legal to a more encompassing view that emphasizes *practice* illuminates important points of interrelationship between citizenship and ethnic identity. From this perspective it becomes evident that the universalistic aspirations of citizenship are rarely if ever reproduced in practice and that “it is more appropriate to interpret different formation of group identities as claims for recognition of citizenship rights” (ibid. 20). Ethnic identity can thus be viewed in terms of its instrumental value in the struggle to gain full access to the benefits of membership in the category “citizen.” Simultaneously, however, the boundaries that define ethnic groups are themselves the sites of strategic struggle on the part of agents who seek to define the social world in terms that are beneficial to their own interests (Wimmer 2013; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Thus, both citizenship and ethnic identity can be fruitfully understood, following the conceptual language developed by Pierre Bourdieu, as “fields” of social struggle.

As Bourdieu explained, “fields” represent sites of struggle in which individuals bring to bear power in the form of “capital” (economic, cultural, social and symbolic) in pursuit of various interests (economic, social, political, etc.) and, indeed, to shape representations of the social world in a manner that is complementary to those interests (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Bourdieu 1986). In the most simplified terms, economic capital refers to that which can be readily exchanged for money, cultural capital refers to cultural competencies, social capital refers to more or less stable networks of mutual recognition and symbolic capital refers to prestige, honour or recognition (Bourdieu 1986). The value of a given stock of any one form of capital is

directly tied to the field of social relations and struggle in which it is put to use. Practices of any given agent in any given social field are further structured by “cognitive and motivating structures” that endow agents with a “feel for the game” and an embodied conception of where they and others “belong” in it (Bourdieu 1977: 76; 1986: 129). These “structuring structures” are inculcated through material conditions that tend, on average, to be more common among members of a single social class or group. Thus, a group *habitus* develops through which members of a class or group develop common, durable dispositions that are manifest in their orientation toward various fields of social relations (Bourdieu 1977). The various fields that constitute the social world interact and influence one another in important ways that, as Bourdieu argued, cannot be theorized in the abstract and must be understood on the basis of empirical observation (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Such is the purpose of this article.

The Case Study: Bahn Lomyen

Thailand’s Deep South is unique within the kingdom in that the majority of its population (roughly 80%) are Sunni Muslims who speak as their mother tongue a Malay dialect known locally as “*bahasa nayu*”. For much of the region’s history, the Deep South has been the site of sometimes violent resistance to Thai political authority. However, it was the formalization of Patani’s inclusion within the Thai kingdom in the early 20th century that spurred the emergence of a truly nationalist resistance movement.³ This movement reached a zenith in the 1970s as a number of Malay ethno-nationalist organizations waged a guerrilla war against the Thai state (McCargo 2009a). Thereafter, over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, the Thai government initiated a program of coordinated counter-insurgency operations, development initiatives and elite cooptation tactics that effectively quelled the violence (ibid.; Ornanong 2013). However, this fragile peace fell apart in dramatic fashion early in the 21st century, when a number of coordinated insurgent attacks heralded the resumption of hostilities. The first such attack came in the form of a raid on a Narathiwat military base on January 4, 2004 during which as many as 50 assailants made off with a large number of military weapons (McCargo 2009a). In the 10 years

³ The romanized spelling of Pat(t)ani has emerged as a contentious issue among activists and observers of the Deep South crisis. In deference to the emergent consensus, this article uses the spelling “Patani” to refer to the region of the historical sultanate and the spelling “Pattani” to refer to the modern Thai province.

that have followed, near daily shootings and bombings have resulted in over 6,500 deaths and 11,000 injuries (Deep South Watch 2015).

The research methodology employed in this study centred around ethnographic observation carried out in the village of Bahn Lomyen in the 12 months from September 2013 to September 2014. I also travelled regularly to the subdistrict office, the district office and to neighbouring villages to attend council meetings, village assemblies, and various special events. In addition, I conducted a comprehensive household survey, visiting every household that was occupied during the research period. In Bahn Lomyen, that survey covered 144 households containing a total of 527 persons. 39% of the households surveyed (containing 32% of the village population) were Thai-speaking Buddhists, 31% of households (containing 34% of the village population) were Malay-speaking Muslims and 25% of households (containing 28% of the village population) were Thai-speaking Muslims. The remaining 5% of households contain mixed Thai and Malay-speaking Muslim families. Linguistically, 65% of the population of Bahn Lomyen spoke southern or central Thai as their first language, while 34% spoke Patani Malay (the remaining 1% spoke Hokkien Chinese, Indonesian or Urdu). 45% of the village population considered themselves conversant in either Thai or Malay as a second language, however, 69% of second language-speakers were Malay-speaking Muslims. Only 18% of Buddhists aged 6 years and above and 24% of Thai-speaking Muslims in the same age range considered themselves conversant in Malay, while 85% of Malay-speakers considered themselves conversant in Thai (see Appendix, Figure 1).

The district encompassing Ongnam has long been a hotbed of insurgent activity and, in 2014, recorded the highest number of violent incidents (54) of any of the 37 districts that comprise the Deep South region (DSID 2015). Much of the district consists of steep, jungle-clad mountains that present an ideal operational base for guerrilla movements. In the 1970s and early 1980s, the Patani United Liberation Organization (PULO) was engaged in a classic guerrilla campaign against the Thai state and its fighters found this upland area to be an ideal staging grounds for their operations. So too did the Malayan Communist Party, which operated out of Southern Thailand from 1955 to 1989 and established several camps in the mountains of this and several surrounding districts (Metzger 2012). In the mid-1970s, the Electricity Generating

Authority of Thailand (a state enterprise) began making plans for large hydroelectric project in the area, which both incentivized the state to clear the jungles of insurgent groups and opened hitherto inaccessible areas to permanent settlement. Thus, the “Self-Help Land Settlement Program for the Development of the South” (*Kronggan Nikhom Sang Ton Eng Pua Pattana Pak Tai* or *Nikhom*) – a project initiated in the 1960s at least in part to counteract separatist forces in the region by increasing the population of Thai-speaking and (presumably) loyal subjects⁴ – expanded into Ongnam Subdistrict. The village of Bahn Lomyen owes its existence to this project.

As a “Self-Help Settlement”, Bahn Lomyen consists primarily of Thai-speaking households (63%) whose origins are to be found outside of the Deep South. During the first phase of the program to populate this village, families from the “Upper South” provinces of Surat Thani, Nakorn Sri Thammarat and Pattalung as well as from the Northeastern provinces of Mahasarakham and Sisaket were offered a 2 rai⁵ homestead, 18 rai of cleared land, inputs to establish a rubber plantation, a monthly stipend and food (primarily rice and canned fish), all on concessionary loans financed by the Asian Development Bank (Nikhom 2013; interviews with villagers). This same offer was subsequently made to landless Buddhist families in Pattani province (also in the Deep South region) in order to make up a shortfall in phase-1 registrants. Thereafter, a number of original *nikhom* members sold their plots and homesteads or moved out of the village to become absentee landlords. As a result, there has been a slow but steady influx of non-*nikhom* members into the village, most of whom are Malay-speaking Muslims.

As indicated, however, a substantial portion of the village population (28%) consists of Thai-speaking Muslims with origins in a region usually referred to as the “upper south.” This is atypical of villages in the Deep South, where the population is typically described as comprising a Malay-speaking Muslim majority and a minority population consisting in the main of Thai Buddhists and ethnically Chinese Thais. In stark contrast to the position of Malay Muslims – whose integration into the Thai nation has long been a source of conflict – the status of Thai-speaking Muslims as full members of the Thai national community is scarcely ever contested.

⁴ See quotations from Field Marshall Sarit Thannarat in Thak 2007: 132.

⁵ 1 rai = 1/3 hectare.

This is the case for a variety of reasons including shared language, a history of intermarriage with Buddhists, the minority status of Muslims in most of the upper south and the development through sustained interaction of a “shared cosmos” of supernatural beliefs (Bajunid 2005; Hortsmann 2004; Burr 1988). Thus, while the demographic makeup of Bahn Lomyen is not necessarily representative of the Deep South region, the village is nevertheless a fruitful site for the comparative study of the relationship between ethnic identity and local-level citizenship.

The village itself stretches for some three kilometres along the banks of a small creek that drains from a dead-end road at the “top” of the village toward the village entrance. At the time of research, the “lower” side of the village contained 58 households, 29 of which are headed by Thai-speaking Muslims, 23 by Malay-speaking Muslims and 6 by mixed couples of Thai and Malay-speaking Muslims; no Buddhists lived in the “lower side” of the village. The entire Buddhist population of Bahn Lomyen resided in the “upper” side of the village, where they accounted for 56 of the neighbourhood’s 86 households (65%). The entrance to the “upper side” of the village is guarded by an outpost of the Village Defense Volunteers group (*Assasamak Raksa Moobahn* or *Or Ror Bor*), an all-Buddhist self-defence corps whose members take it in turn to guard the entrance to the village against attack. The upper village is also home to a unit of Border Patrol Police (*Tor Chor Dor*), a heavily armed police force charged with maintaining border security. (Border Patrol Police in Bahn Lomyen typically carried assault rifles, body armour and grenade launchers while performing their duty.) An additional unit of Special Forces Border Patrol Police (*Pon Rom*) was stationed at the intersection leading to the village, approximately one kilometre from the village itself. Thus, it is observed that the village of Bahn Lomyen contained a heavy security presence in the form of professional state security officials and state-sponsored militia.

The linguistic and religious diversity of the village was manifest in patterns of association and interaction that effectively divided the village into three distinct communities. The most readily apparent axis of division was that between the upper and lower village. As became clear within a few days of my arrival in the Bahn Lomyen, Buddhists rarely travelled to the lower village and would only pass through as a matter of necessity. Relations between Muslims and Buddhists in the upper village, meanwhile, were notably cool. The majority of Muslims in the

upper village were Malay-speakers and men of that group tended to congregate around the *surao* (a prayer house), a Malay-Muslim-owned tea shop and the Mosque. Buddhists, meanwhile, tended to congregate around the Village Defense Volunteers fortification – where they were visited regularly by officers of the Border Patrol Police – or on household stoops where afternoons were passed playing card games for small sums of money. Finally, relations between Thai and Malay-speaking Muslims appeared unfailingly amicable and, for men, centred around Mosque and participation collective work on a Mosque-owned fruit plantation. Thai and Malay-speaking Muslim women, meanwhile, interacted most regularly during events centred around the Mosque, where they collaborated on food preparation and in one of two state-sponsored Women’s Handicraft Groups (*glum satree*). Largely as a result of linguistic difference, however, Thai and Malay-speaking Muslims tended to spend their leisure time separately, gathering at separate tea shops and congregating at distinct, mono-linguistic “hangouts.”

Decentralization and Local-Level Government in Southernmost Thailand

The discourse around decentralization took root in Thailand during a period of sweeping institutional reform culminating in the 1997 adoption of the so-called “people’s constitution.” The kingdom’s uneven emergence from extended period of military-dominated “semi-democracy” coincided with period of marked enthusiasm for decentralization amongst scholars, international organizations and governments the world over. Proponents argued that decentralization could result in a greater sense of autonomy on the part of citizens, enhanced state legitimacy and the alleviation of pressures for separatism by regional or ethnic groups (Bardhan and Mookerjee 2006; World Bank 1997). With the support of some prominent politicians and academics, civil society groups involved in democratization campaigns began advocating for a program of substantive decentralization, with the initial focus of the campaign on the direct election of provincial governors. However, countervailing pressure from the powerful Ministry of the Interior – which maintains control over the appointment of its senior bureaucrats to provincial governorships – succeeded in foreclosing that possibility (Tanet 2006). Instead, the thrust of decentralization efforts was focused on the subdistrict level of government.

Though long a part of the Thai state's administrative structure, subdistrict governments were introduced as a distinct legal entity by way of the *Tambon Council and Tambon Administrative Organization Act 1994* (Nagai et al. 2008). Subdistrict governments in Thailand fall into six categories: rural subdistricts (*tambon*), subdistrict municipalities (*tesabahn tambon*), town municipalities (*tesaban muang*), city municipalities (*tesabahn nakorn*), and two special cases, namely the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration and Pattaya City. Beginning in 2000, a process was initiated by which a wide range of administrative responsibilities were transferred from central government ministries to the subdistrict and municipal levels (Mahakanjana 2004). This was accompanied by fiscal decentralization measures intended to enhance the capacity of subdistrict governments to discharge those responsibilities. However, initial targets for fiscal decentralization proved untenable and were subsequently revised down without any reduction in the range of services for which local-level governments would be responsible (Nagai et al. 2008; Mahakanjana 2004). Nevertheless, it remains the case that Thailand's decentralization initiative resulted in significantly expanded mandates and budgets for subdistrict and municipal governments and, as a consequence, enhanced the value of holding office at that level.

In southernmost Thailand, the question of decentralization is inextricably tied up with the region's history of integration into the Thai nation state and longstanding demands for some form of regional autonomy. The question of autonomy for the Deep South dates at least to a famous 7-point proposal submitted to the Thai government by Haji Sulong in March, 1947 (McCargo 2009a). Among its proposals were calls for fiscal autonomy from the central Thai state and for a regional government headed by a locally born governor. These demands, however, met with an unsympathetic response, particularly following the military coup of 1948 (Baker and Phongpaichit 2009). In more recent times, prominent advocates for regional autonomy have included former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad, former Thai Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyuth and Dr. Prawase Wasi, the former vice-chair of a National Reconciliation Commission directly charged with addressing the problems in the region (McCargo 2012). Notwithstanding such high-profile advocacy, however, there exist a host of obstacles to such proposals being put into action, including a glaring lack of political will and vocal support from active political elites both within and outside of the region. This can at least partially be explained by the perception that such support entails grave political and personal

risk. Nationalist narratives of avoiding colonial subjugation and the gradual loss of “Thai” territory are central to the kingdom’s understanding of its own history and place the ruling monarchical dynasty at the centre of the story. Any proposal that even hints at loosening the grip on “Thai” territory risks being seen to insult that legacy and, thus, the monarchical tradition itself (McCargo 2012).

Leaving aside the question of autonomy, however, there remain several sources of advocacy for enhanced decentralization as a means of redressing the conflict in southernmost Thailand. Mahakanjana (2008), for example, obtained survey results indicating that Muslims (bilingual Muslims in particular) have positive perceptions of their own political efficacy at the local level, suggesting that the Deep South is uniquely suited to further decentralization measures. A UNDP-funded program in the southernmost region entitled the Southern Thailand Empowerment and Participation Project (STEP) also advocates for enhanced participation in development planning and budgeting. In addition, reference to citizen participation at the local level has become standard in planning documents and other publications of state agencies operating in the region. For example, in its “Operational Plan for Development in the Southern Border Provinces 2013–2014”, the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre (SBPAC)⁶ specifies an operation strategy of “strengthening the democratic system of administration such that the people participate at the village and community level and achieve equitable development in keeping with the local way of life, identity, language, cultural traditions, the desires of the people and solving problems they face” (SBPAC 2014: 4). Such references to “citizen participation” (*gan mi suan ruam kong prachachon*) are nearly ubiquitous in development planning documents at the provincial and subdistrict level in the region.

Notwithstanding the important efforts of academics, international organizations and Thai state agencies, very little of the advocacy for decentralization and, in particular, participatory local government proceeds from a strong empirical and evidentiary basis. There exist few in-depth studies of the relationships between citizens in the Deep South region and the local-level

⁶ The Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre is a body charged with coordinating the operation of 20 Ministries, and 10 government departments operating in the four southern border provinces of Narathiwat, Pattani, Satun and Yala.

state. Moreover, what studies do exist (e.g. Mahakanjana 2008; Deep South Watch 2015; Asia Foundation 2010) tend to proceed on the basis of survey data that, while useful, cannot be relied upon to uncover subtle dynamics and power relations that operate within and around formal administrative institutions. This is all the more true in a context of insecurity and uncertainty that can render survey respondents less than forthcoming as to their genuine views and experiences. The present article endeavours to offer just such an empirically grounded perspective on the relationship between citizens and decentralized government in the southernmost region. In so doing, it points to shortcomings in the institutional design of decentralized government that inhibit the development of relationships to the local state grounded in rights-based citizenship.

Popular Representation in the Subdistrict Government

A major milestone in the development of local-level government in Thailand occurred in 2000 with the introduction of a rewritten Municipal Act. The act introduced into Thailand's subdistrict and municipal governments the "strong mayor" system through which directly elected municipal "Mayors" (*nayok tesamontri*) would wield greatly enhanced executive authority (Mahakanjana 2004). Under this system, a number of municipal councillors are elected (12 in subdistrict municipalities, 18 in town municipalities and 24 in cities) alongside the mayor, who appoints his or her own executive council (see Appendix, Figure 2). The municipal council wields very little power in relation to the chief executive and, although the municipality remains under the supervision of the district and provincial administration, the arrangement affords mayors a strong hand in the planning and administration of municipal budgets.

The "strong mayor" system was introduced into Ongnam Subdistrict in 2007, when the subdistrict was reclassified as a subdistrict municipality. This change strengthened the hand of an already influential local figure known locally as Nayok Loh, who had previously occupied the post of subdistrict chief (*kamnan*) for eight years. Nayok Loh – a Malay-speaking Muslim man with extensive kinship ties in the area – successfully contested the first mayoral election and was not challenged in his bid for reelection in 2011. In interviews and conversations, several residents of Ongnam subdistrict indicated that Nayok Loh is connected to the "clique" or "power

network” (*pak puak*) of Wan Muhammad Nor Matha,⁷ perhaps the most influential politician in the Deep South region. During his tenure, Nayok Loh has exercised executive authority in such a manner as to give local residents the impression that he is in total control over the local government and its budgets. Moreover, his position of authority is backed by the widespread perception that any opposition could be met with violence.⁸ In essence – and in a manner that has been observed in many different parts of Thailand (Arghiros 2001) – the mayor of Ongnam Subdistrict derives power from both state-backed authority (*amnaat*) and extra-judicial power referred to locally as “influence” (*itthipon*).

In addition to the direct election of “strong mayors”, popular representation at the subdistrict level is achieved via the Municipal or Subdistrict Council (see Appendix, Figure 2). In subdistrict municipalities like Ongnam, 12 councillors are directly elected from two electoral districts, with electors selecting six representatives from the slate of candidates for their electoral district. Councillors then elect a chair and vice chair from amongst their ranks. In addition, the senior bureaucrat at the subdistrict level – the Deputy District Officer (*palat tesabahn*) – sits on the municipal council in an observer’s role. The most recent Municipal Council election in Ongnam municipality was held in November 2011 and returned a slate of 10 male and two female representatives. Eleven of the 12 representatives were Malay-speaking Muslims and one – a man from Bahn Lomyen – was a Thai-speaking Muslim.

In conversations and interviews, several Buddhist villagers in Bahn Lomyan indicated that, owing to their local minority status and the situation of ongoing insurgent violence, their continued presence in the area was only made possible by the continued support of powerful local figures, specifically Nayok Loh. Concomitant with that perception of contingency was an experience of powerlessness to express criticism of the local government, lest that support should be withdrawn. A frequently encountered response from Buddhists when asked about their opinion of local politics was that they “live under a system of ‘influence’” and “can do nothing.”

⁷ Wan Nor’s *Al Wadah* faction had formed a key component of Thaksin Shinawatra’s *Thai Rak Thai* (Thais love Thai) government, before being summarily rejected by southern voters in the election of February 2005 (McCargo 2009a). The faction has since ceased to play a significant role in Thai national politics, but the network of connections that formed its structure continue to be important conduits for power in the Deep South region.

⁸ Interviews with villagers.

During a conversation with group of Buddhist men in their 30s, for example, I was told that the Mayor and his clique are powerful and must be obeyed. According to their ominous assessment, the consequences of openly disagreeing with the Mayor included “[going] back to wherever you were before you were born”. This condition of contingent and precarious existence informed a general orientation toward local government of passivity and avoidance. This was in keeping with the generally insular nature of Buddhist village life, where villagers rarely ventured out of the Buddhist-dominated “upper village.” In the language of Bourdieuan sociology, Thai Buddhist villagers had developed a group habitus characterized by group insularity and disengagement from the field of power at the subdistrict level.

The pervading orientation of disengagement from local-level politics was further informed by the failure of municipal council election to produce Buddhist representatives. This was despite the fact that three out of the four villages in electoral district 2 of the municipality are home to significant Buddhist populations. For some Buddhist villagers, the lack of Buddhist representation on the subdistrict council and in the subdistrict executive was symptomatic of an electoral system incapable of providing adequate representation for local minorities (i.e. non-Muslims). According to one Buddhist villager – a fluent Malay-speaker who maintained friendly relations with his Malay-speaking Muslim neighbours – Buddhist candidates could not hope to win office in subdistricts with predominantly Muslim electorates. Muslims, he said, “get together” to ensure that only Muslim candidates succeed. Another Buddhist villager suggested that local politicians “play on relations” to achieve office. If such connections were seen as particularly important to gaining political office, however, so too was money. This view was expressed by one Buddhist villager, who pointed out that votes in subdistrict elections are bought and sold for 1000 baht (USD\$27). “If you don’t have money”, she said, “you cannot have power”.

There was, however, a more proximate cause of the absence of Buddhist representation in the subdistrict council: no Buddhists had come forward as candidates in the election. At least three factors might help explain this outcome. First is the well-documented fact that non-military

state agents – including bureaucrats, teachers, Buddhist monks⁹ and elected officials – have been core targets of insurgent violence (see Deep South Watch 2014). In the district in question, however, less than 5% of the 881 people killed and injured in violent incidents between 2004 and 2014 were local government officials, while nearly half were regular civilians (DSID 2015). A second explanatory factor is that, as indicated by several respondents in this study, Thai Buddhists have no hope of succeeding in local election in a Muslim-dominated subdistrict. This explanation, however, is difficult to substantiate given the failure of Thai Buddhists to contest local elections. A third factor, and the one that this study proposes best explains the outcome in question, is that the representative function of Subdistrict Council members is almost totally eclipsed by the dominance of the executive. Under this condition, the incentives for seeking elected office in the subdistrict government revolve around gaining access to the informal network of power through which the business of the local-level state actually functions. This network – centred around the figure of Nayok Loh – functions in a particular ethno-religious milieu that presents limited points of entry for non-Muslims.

The perception of Nayok Loh's dominance over the subdistrict government is further substantiated by the comments of Thai-speaking Muslims in Bahn Lomyen, who expressed views of the subdistrict government strikingly similar to those of their Buddhist neighbours. For example, one Thai-speaking Muslim man who had lived in Bahn Lomyen since he was a young child told me that people live in fear of Nayok Loh and would never openly disagree with him. He submitted that disagreeing with the mayor would carry with it the risk of having budgets for village infrastructure and other services redirected elsewhere. He also suggested that violent reprisals could result (although he could not provide any examples of that having happened in the past). Another Thai-speaking Muslim villager suggested that, as outsiders to the region, Thai-speaking Muslims could not press their interests in the subdistrict government and had to accept the will of "influential people" (*poo mee itthipon*). Still another summed up the condition in terms that spoke directly to the conditions of citizenship at the local level: "we have rights, but it is as though we have none at all". These responses are indicative of a relationship to subdistrict-

⁹ There exist multiple links between the Thai state and the ecclesiastical order of Buddhist Monks in Thailand, some of which are specific to the region of the Deep South and the ongoing conflict. See Jerryson 2009; McCargo 2009b.

level political authority that renders Thai-speaking Muslim villagers – much like their Buddhist neighbours – passive subjects reliant on the good will and favour of the powerful, namely Nayok Loh and his clique.

The similarity between Buddhist and Thai-speaking Muslim assessments of the subdistrict government, however, fails to account for the long-standing political dominance of Thai-speaking Muslims in Bahn Lomyen itself. This dominance is evidenced by the fact that, since the village's establishment in 1983, all five of the men elected to the position of village headman have been Thai-speaking Muslims. It also extends to the election in 2011 of a Thai-speaking Muslim man named Sor Tor Mat to the subdistrict council as its sole non-Malay-speaking member (“Sor Tor” being the acronym of Samachik Sapah Tong Tin or “local council member”). Owing in part to the fact that the majority of Thai-speaking Muslims were recruited into the Nikhom Project from two villages in Pattalung province, members of that community tend to have more kinship relations living in the village than is true of Malay-speaking Muslims and Buddhists (see Appendix, Figure 3). This fact partially accounts for the ability of Thai-speaking Muslims in the village to mobilize the necessary social resources to successfully contest elections, despite the fact that Buddhists and, more recently, Malay-speaking Muslims account for larger shares of the total village population. However, it is also widely understood among villagers that anyone occupying an official position in either village or subdistrict level government must align him/herself with Nayok Loh or risk having his/her village neglected in subdistrict budgets (or, as some suggested, far worse). In this regard, Muslim religious identity can be seen as a valuable asset, particularly given the fact that all of the village headmen and subdistrict council members from other villages in Ongnam subdistrict are Muslims and that many of the opportunities for network building among them are centred around Islamic religious activities (see below).

The monopolization of elected position in Bahn Lomyen by Thai-speaking Muslims should not, however, be taken to indicate effective representation for that community. To the contrary, the comments of Thai-speaking Muslim villagers suggest that the village headman, Sor Tor Mat and other subdistrict council members primarily represent their own private interests and the interests of their associates when discharging their official duties. As one villager put it,

“local politics is primarily about cliques. For the most part, politicians are selfish”. Another pointed out that the benefits of development programs and other schemes typically accrue to the families of politicians and their friends. At the same time, however, the financial benefits of subdistrict council membership accruing to Sor Tor Mat appeared modest. He received a salary of 9660 baht (USD\$270) per month, which supplemented his income from farming a modest rubber plantation (10 rai) and working with his wife as a share-cropper on another. He was also able to channel some development funding toward his own family members. Such was the case for example, when funds became available for the establishment of a women’s craft-making collective in the village and Sor Tor Mat’s wife was made chair of the group. This example notwithstanding, however, it was clear that, three years after having gained office in the Municipal Council, the economic status of Sor Tor Mat and his family had not progressed beyond what was typical of a Thai-speaking Muslim household in Bahn Lomyen.

What winning election to the subdistrict council did offer Sor Tor Mat and other elected members was a measure of prestige and an opportunity to further develop and expand a network of valuable social connections. In the language of Bourdieuan sociology, the position of subdistrict councillor brought with it significant symbolic capital as well as opportunities to amass valuable social capital (Bourdieu 1986; 1989). The symbolic capital derived from the position of subdistrict councillor was evident every time a fellow villager referred to Mat by the official title “Sor Tor”. This title was a mark of distinction that immediately differentiated Sor Tor Mat from his neighbours. Opportunities to amass social capital, meanwhile, arose within the meetings of the subdistrict council itself as well as during the numerous functions to which council members are unfailingly invited. These included, for example, the practice of taking Friday prayers and communal meals following the conclusion of some subdistrict council meetings. They also included invitations to the various fast-breaking meals hosted by the subdistrict “sheriff” (kamnan), Nayok Loh and others during the holy month of Ramadan. Invitations to attend such meals and to select a group of men to accompany him afforded Sor Tor Mat opportunities to forge ties of loyalty within his own community and to rub shoulders with the elite of neighbouring villages. Another such network-building opportunity took place during the period of field research when Nayok Loh arranged to take all of the subdistrict councillors

and his deputies on a 15 day Haj tour at a reported cost of 60,000 baht (USD\$1,680) per person.¹⁰ It is notable that these kinds of network-building opportunities are directly associated with the Islamic religion and the Islamic community (*ummah*). As such, they are inherently exclusive of Buddhists.

This centring of political network building activities around Islamic religious practices might be expected to present similar avenues to participation for Malay-speaking Muslims, who are possessed of identity characteristics and cultural competencies that facilitate participation in a predominantly Malay-speaking, Muslim milieu. Comments from Malay-speaking Muslim respondents on questions related to local government, however, indicate a disinclination to engage directly with local power structures. In interviews carried out in conjunction with household surveys, several Malay-speaking Muslim respondents (both men and women) offered sometimes elaborate criticisms (often veering well into the territory of conspiracy theory) on “the government” (*rathabahn*) and “officials” (*jao natee*). On the subject of local politics, however, respondents tended to become much more guarded, as was the case with one man who declined elaborate his views on the subject beyond the one-word answer “good.” Still more expressed an inability to answer the question on the grounds that they “don’t understand”, “can’t explain” or “don’t really know” about local politics.¹¹ Still others were more direct in expressing their disinterest in local politics, stating that they “don’t think about it one way or the other”, or that they “don’t know and don’t care.” One respondent, however, may have summed up the subtext of these various evasions when he simply replied “[I’m] afraid”. This disinclination to engage with local politics can be explained, at least in part, by the group’s relative lack of deep roots and strong webs of relationships in the subdistrict.

In Bahn Lomyen, Malay-speaking Muslims represented a minority community that had only recently expanded to reach numerical parity with the Thai-speaking Muslim and Thai Buddhist populations in the village. On average, the heads of Malay-speaking Muslim

¹⁰ According to Sor Tor Loh, the cost of this trip was born personally by Nayok Soh. I was unable to confirm or deny that as the trip took place shortly after the conclusion of my field research.

¹¹ Lest it should be suspected that these answers stemmed from the respondents’ inability to express more nuanced assessments in Thai (the primary language in all interviews), it should be noted that the majority of these comments came in response to questions on local politics at the end of the household survey and were typically preceded by lively discussions (in Thai) on a number of topics, including national politics.

households had lived in the village for 15 years, while the heads of Thai-speaking Muslim households and Buddhist households had lived in the village for 27 years.¹² As noted above (and in Appendix, Figure 3), Malay-speaking Muslim households also enjoyed fewer kinship connections in the village, with each having, on average, 1.5 households in the village to which it could claim a direct kinship connection. This is comparable with Thai Buddhist households (with average of 1.8) but is significantly less than Thai-speaking Muslim households, which averaged 3.8 related households in the village. These factors suggest lower stocks of social capital, an important resource in an environment characterized by insecurity and uncertainty. In addition, a higher proportion of Malay-speaking Muslim households in Bahn Lomyen were landless (41%) than their Buddhist and Thai-speaking Muslim neighbours (33% and 24% rates of household landlessness, respectively). Among land-owning households, Malay Muslims also averaged smaller holdings (10 rai) than Buddhists and Thai-speaking Muslims (averages of 13 and 16 rai, respectively) (see Appendix, Figure 4). This indicates that Malay-speaking Muslims in Bahn Lomyen were, on average, less well-endowed with economic capital than their Thai-speaking neighbours. These two factors explain to a significant extent the political passivity of that group as a whole. As was the case with Buddhist villagers, the objective conditions of Malay-speaking Muslims in Bahn Lomyen appear to have been inscribed in a group habitus characterized by disengagement from the field of power at the local level. Unlike Thai Buddhists, however, this type of disengagement characterized the typical Malay-speaking Muslim's orientation to agents of the central state as well (most prominently, the military and police).

Participatory Development Planning

An additional milestone in the development of Thailand's system of subdistrict-level government came in 2005, when the Ministry of the Interior introduced regulations to promote citizen participation in local-level development planning and budgeting (Weerasak 2012). As decentralization programs have progressed in numerous countries around the world, there has emerged widespread enthusiasm for the development of institutional mechanisms for direct citizen participation in local-level government. A rapidly expanding body of scholarly literature

¹² All data in this paragraph were obtained through a comprehensive household survey of Ban Lomyen.

has emerged that emphasizes the development of “deeper” forms of democracy through creative alternatives to the “familiar configurations of political representation and bureaucratic administration” (Fung and Wright 2003: 15). From the outset of its shift toward limited decentralization, Thailand has embraced public participation as a core component of that program. However, a number of studies have pointed to low levels of citizen interest in participation resulting from insufficient knowledge, fear of being held liable for mismanagement and a tendency to view public administration as the business of officials (Chaiwatt 2012; Prakorn 2007; UNDP 2013). Meanwhile, the Ministry of the Interior has failed to back the legal mandate of its directives with supporting efforts to furnish subdistrict officials with an adequate understanding of the core tenets and purposes of citizen participation (Weerasak 2012; 2014). As a result, many localities have pursued minimal compliance with these directives while subdistrict and municipal executive continue to exert control of development planning and budgeting.

In Ongnam Subdistrict, the process of drafting of a Three Year Development Plan for 2015–2017 included citizen participation in the form of “civic forums” (*wetee prachakom*) held several villages, including Bahn Lomyen. The Bahn Lomyen meeting lasted about one hour and began with introduction given by the chief of staff in the office of the deputy district officer (the senior representative of the Interior Ministry in the municipal government office). As the facilitator of the meeting, she conveyed a list of development strategies in the areas of education, culture, religion, health, quality of life and so on. Finally, she asked if anyone had anything to add. In the forums I observed directly and in the meeting minutes of the civic forum held in the village one year earlier, no villagers submitted any comments or questions during the meeting. Finally, the official facilitating the meeting asked for nominations for the Local Development Planning Committee, for which three villagers – all Muslims – were nominated by fellow villagers. In the event, none of the villagers nominated were selected to the committee and the only resident from Bahn Lomyen to serve as a citizen representative on and of the planning committees was the village headman (*poo yai bahn*), himself a Thai-speaking Muslim.

A survey of Buddhist villagers’ attitudes with respect to these kinds of village forums revealed a general aversion to presenting ideas and suggestions within them. For example, when asked about his willingness to present ideas in civic forums, one Buddhist villager complained

that he had suggested several times in the past that the main road in the village needed repair, but money was allocated to an access road to rubber plantations that, in his estimation, only benefitted villagers with “good connections”. Another Buddhist man told me that he had presented the same idea (for constructing a children’s playground) many times in the past without results and had since given up. Others expressed the idea that the purpose of the meetings was just to give the impression that subdistrict politicians were interested in their concerns. Yet another man made a much more ominous assessment, saying that Buddhists were afraid to present their ideas in public forums because by doing so one risked being seen to be at odds with the priorities of Nayok Loh. People who oppose Nayok Loh, he said, “have short lives.”

Among Malay and Thai-speaking Muslims, similarly negative assessments of village forums prevailed. While the vast majority of respondents indicated that they attend village meetings whenever they are asked, few claimed to have presented their ideas in these forums. In particular, a number of Malay-speaking Muslims respondents indicated that they attended village meetings out of a sense of duty and came “whenever the village headman asks me to.” Others indicated that it was the role of “leaders” (*poo nam*) like the village headman to present ideas and not that of common villagers. One such villager (a Malay-speaking Muslim woman) indicated that it would be inappropriate for her to present ideas, because she “isn’t anybody [important].” Meanwhile, a rather more cynical attitude – echoing that expressed by some Buddhists – was evident amongst a number of Thai-speaking Muslim respondents, who intimated that the real purpose of such community forums was merely to give the impression of genuine consultation. According to one respondent, the true purpose of such meetings was to obtain photograph evidence of officials performing their duty. At the same time, however, a few individuals held more positive views of village meetings. The teacher at the village’s Early Childhood Development Centre, for example, felt that it was her duty to provide input to such meetings and that officials gave serious consideration to villagers’ inputs. Nevertheless, such positive assessments were rare. By and large, residents of Bahn Lomyen did not view civic forums as effective means of gaining influence over the policies and practices of the local level state.

Analysis of the Three Year Development Plan for Ongnam Subdistrict: 2015–2017 (Ongnam Subdistrict Municipality 2014) substantiates the widely shared impression that participatory mechanisms have a limited impact on development planning in the subdistrict. While the plan identifies civic forums as an integral component of the development planning process, nowhere does it refer directly to the outcomes of those forums. The only reference to the input of regular citizens into the process comes in the third chapter, which lists five “problems and needs of the citizenry with respect to development.” These include the problems of insurgent violence in the region, poor communications and transport infrastructure, the low price of agricultural commodities, difficulties in collecting tax revenue, and the lack of income from tourism. Of these five issues, only those regarding agricultural prices and infrastructure resonate with answers given in the household survey for this study regarding respondents’ desires for improved local government service. The remaining three issues were rarely if ever raised by respondents as issues to be remedied by local-level government and do not show up in records of civic forums held in 2014.¹³ Notably, however, each features prominently in the Three Year Development Plan for Yala Province (Yala PAO 2014), which is itself authored by central government bureaucrats under the supervision of the provincial governor (a non-elected bureaucrat). In fact, a close comparison of the provincial and subdistrict municipality development plans suggests a degree of coordination that would be at best unlikely given a significant scope for citizen influence over local level development planning.

Analysis and Conclusion

Decentralization introduced into Thailand a system of local administration that has more extensive responsibilities, stronger fiscal capacities and greater independence than at any time in the kingdom’s history. Proponents of decentralization may have expected such arrangements to result a greater sense of autonomy on the part of citizens, enhanced state legitimacy and the alleviation of pressures for separatism by regional or ethnic groups (Bardhan and Mookerjee 2006). As a result of an institutional design that places an inordinate amount of power in the

¹³ Low prices for agricultural commodities was a frequently cited problem that most respondents laid squarely at the feet of the Prime Minister.

hands of the executive, however, subdistrict and municipal governments in Thailand are at risk of capture by rent-seeking power networks that subvert, neglect or ignore institutions of democratic representation and participation. In the case of Ongnam subdistrict, the condition of executive dominance in combination with the popular election of subdistrict council representatives presented opportunities and inducements for engagement with the local level state that varied significantly by ethno-religious grouping. This final section explores some of the ways in which this condition informed patterns of inter-group alienation and estrangement.

As noted, the poor assessment of subdistrict representation and participation on the part of Buddhist villagers corresponded with a general orientation of disengagement and avoidance with regard to local government. Buddhist villagers in Bahn Lomyen were a self-reliant group, tied together through near universal membership in the Village Defense Volunteers (*Or Ror Bor*). The latter functioned as something of a social space in which Buddhist villagers would share meals, watch news and sports on television, and drink alcohol. Their shared feeling of being a threatened community charged with its own defense contributed to a sense of unity that was strongly associated with symbols of Thai national identity. These included, most prominently, the King and Queen of Thailand and the figure of a famous southern Thai monk known as *Luang Pho Thuat*, who was strongly associated with the incorporation of the Deep South into the Thai kingdom (Jory 2008). The leadership of the Village Defense Volunteers also played a prominent role alongside Border Patrol Police officers in ceremonies marking the King and Queen's birthdays and the Buddhist community in general enjoyed friendly relations with the state security personnel, all of whom were Buddhists. Thus it can be seen that, in effect, Buddhists were alienated from the practices of citizenship at the level of local government and responded by engaging in practices that reemphasized their national citizenship in what was symbolically represented as a distinctly Buddhist Thai nation.

In comparison, Thai-speaking Muslims were much better placed to engage with local-level government, both in terms of their ability to gain access to it and to benefit from such access. In the first instance, the capacity of some Thai-speaking Muslims to participate in local-level politics can be attributed to their advantages in terms of social capital in the form of kinship and quasi-kinship relations. In certain cases – as was reported to me with regard to the Village

Headman's campaign for election to that position – such kinship networks could be drawn upon to amass the requisite economic capital to shift the outcome of elections through vote-buying. In terms of gaining benefit from such access, Thai-speaking Muslims also enjoyed a relatively good position, owing to their Muslim religious identity. As Muslims, members of this group possessed the kind of identity characteristics and cultural competencies to engage fruitfully in networking activities in a predominantly Muslim field of power. This in turn introduced an incentive for Thai-speaking Muslims to practice their Muslim faith in a public manner and to emphasize the significance of religion as an identity category. This dynamic helps to explain the diligence with which many Thai-speaking Muslim men attended Mosque, the widespread adoption of Malay-Muslim styles of dress and the value attached to attending such events as the Ramadan fast-breaking meal held at the home of Nayok Loh. These practices, while often entirely sincere, further endow practitioners with symbolic capital as “good Muslims”, which is an asset that carried value in the field of power in Ongnam subdistrict. To that extent, practices of citizenship that convey membership in the polity at the local level are indistinguishable from practices that convey membership in the Islamic *ummah*.

That social capital formed around kinship networks represents the most important asset in gaining access to power and resources in Ongnam district also explains to a significant extent the position of Malay-speaking Muslims in Bahn Lomyen. As latecomers to the village, the Malay-speaking Muslims community in Bahn Lomyen developed slowly and was, until recently, the smallest of the village's three readily apparent identity groups. Unlike Thai-speaking Muslims, Malay-speaking Muslim villagers in Bahn Lomyen did not share common origins in ancestral villages, nor did they enjoy the same kind of symbolic relationship to Thai national citizenship and the Thai security forces as Buddhist villagers. As a result, even as their numbers grew, Malay-speaking Muslim villagers remained a politically marginalized community. While they possessed the requisite symbolic and cultural currency to participate in a predominantly Malay-speaking Muslim field of power, they lacked the social and economic capital through which entry into that field is gained. What the position of this community in Bahn Lomyen indicates is that, in an ethnically diverse subdistrict such as Ongman in which the subdistrict executive exercises domination over the local government, successful participation in the field of power is not simply a matter of shared ethnic identity.

If we recall Turner's definition of citizenship as “a set of practices...which define a person as a competent member of society” (Turner 1993: 2), it becomes clear that the practices observed in Bahn Lomyen of avoidance, disengagement and what might be called “passive attendance” define members of society in particular passive and disempowered terms. This is the case because the type of state-society relations described in this article very rarely proceed on the basis of rights. Instead, the practices of denizens of Ongnam Subdistrict Municipality with respect to the local-level state more closely resemble those of subjects, whose access to the benefits of membership in the polity are contingent on the good graces of the powerful. As has been argued, those practices are informed by objective conditions that are shared, in general terms, among members of the village's three ethno-religious communities. At the same time, however, those practices inform the continual process of making and remaking group boundaries – Thai Buddhists associating ever more closely with the overtly Buddhist symbols of the central state and Thai-speaking Muslims emphasizing their common link with Malay-speakers as Muslims. In this manner, the failure of Thailand's project of decentralization to produce a form of local-level government characterized by effective representative and participatory institutions contributes to maintaining and perhaps even exacerbating inter-group estrangement. It does so by falling well short of the lofty goal of universality by which citizenship regimes can and should be judged.

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Appendix

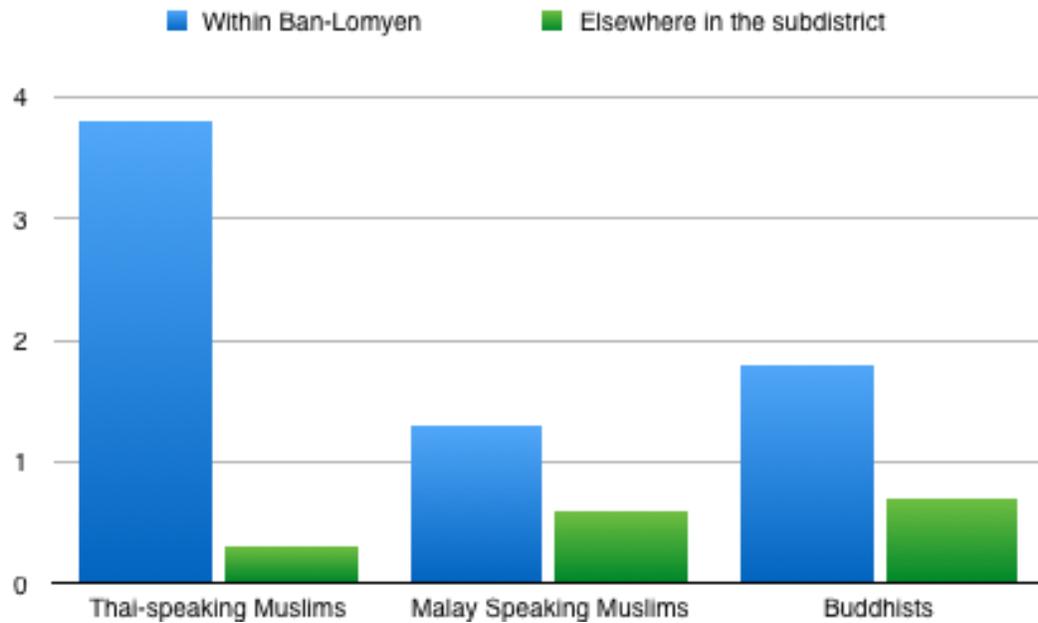


Figure 1: Second language Capability in Bahn Lomyen (i.e Thai-speakers' ability to speak Malay and vice-versa).

Source: Household Survey, 2013-2104.

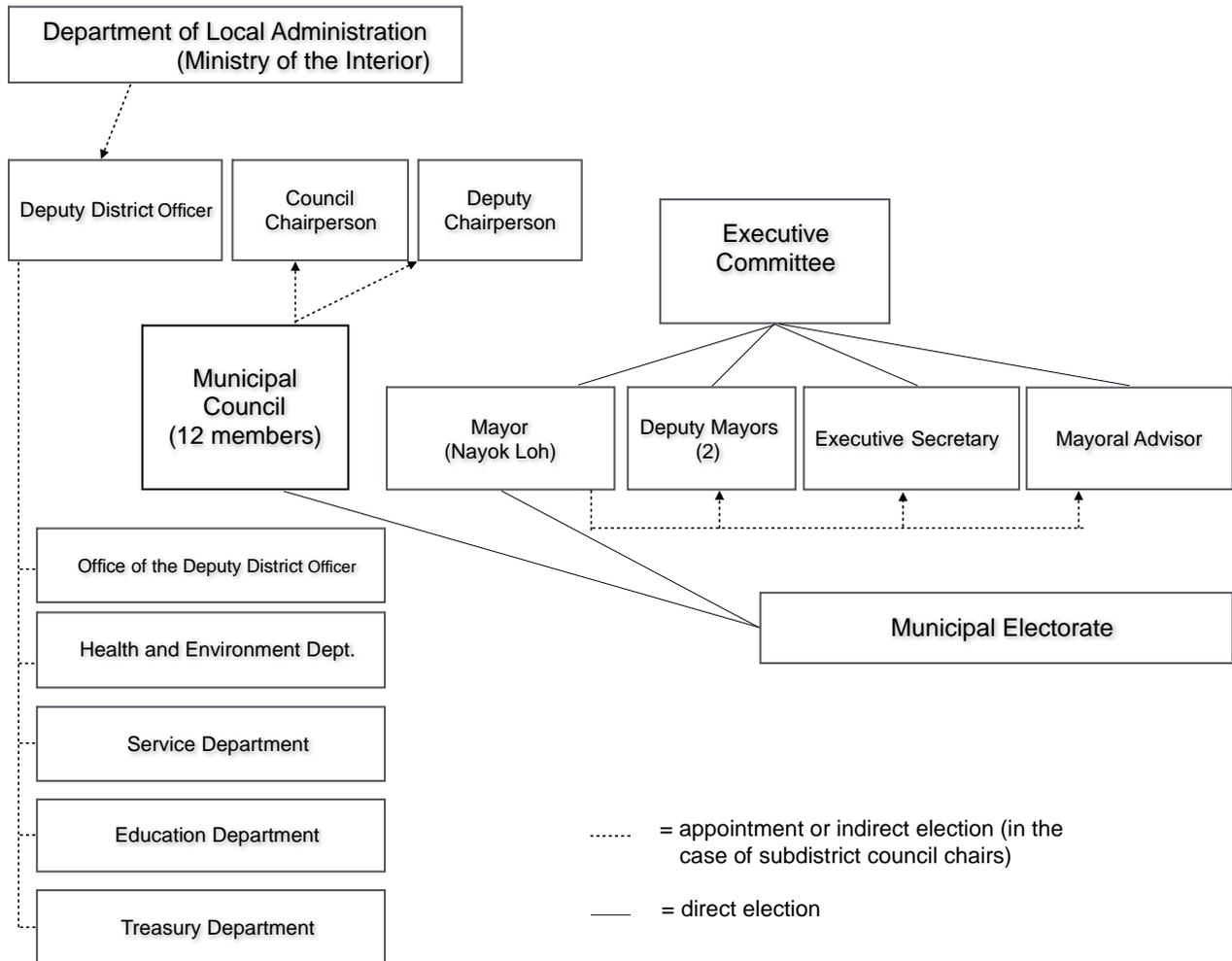


Figure 2: Schematic Diagram of the Ongnam Subdistrict Municipality Government.

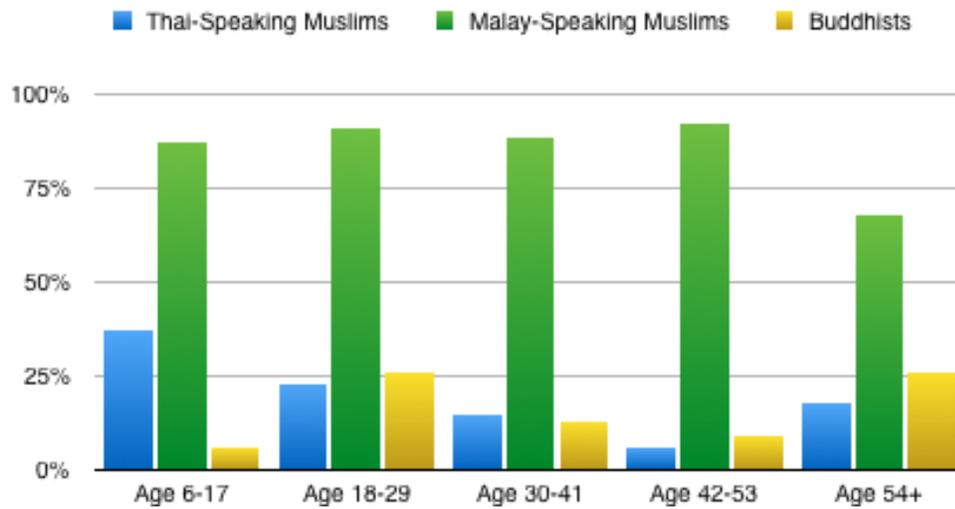


Figure 3: Kinship relations (average number of households to which respondents could claim direct kinship relations, by identity grouping).

Source: Household survey, 2013-2014.

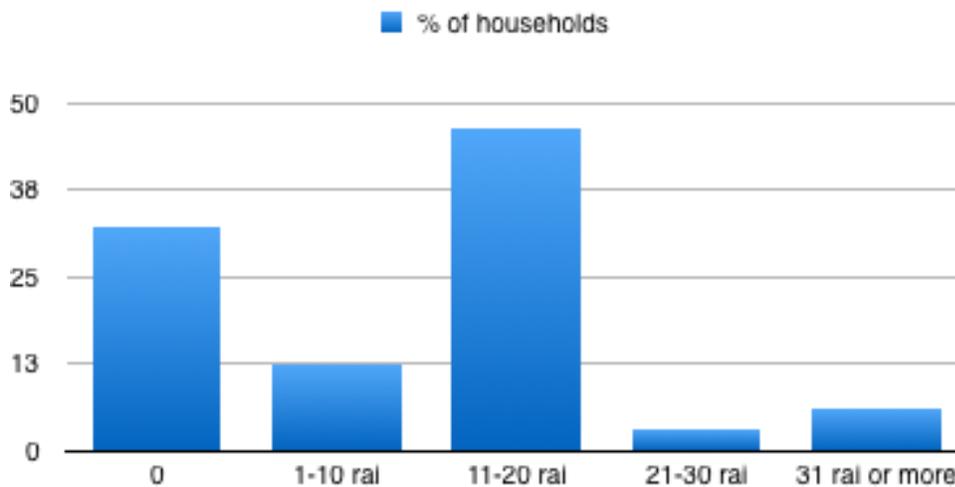


Figure 4: Distribution of Agricultural Landholdings in Bahn Lomyen (% of households).

Source: Household Survey, 2013-2014.