



Fighting Corruption from the Bottom: A Case of Thailand

Charas Suwanmala

Professor and Dean, Faculty of Political Science

Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand

scharas@chula.ac.th

An intention of this paper is to make an observation on the civic organization movements in combating corruption in Thailand.

Civil organizations

Civic organizations in Thailand comprised of mass media, social, religious and community organizations, labor unions, occupational solidarities, community organizations, and networks of international organizations. Most of these have multi-purpose missions, anti-corruption is one among others.

Where corruptions take place

Corruptions is a common phenomena in Thai society. They can be wherever state related transactions take place. Following are common areas of corruption in Thailand.

1. Public policy process, the so-called “policy corruption” and “political rent-seeking”.
2. Revenue administration, including corruptions in taxation, fines, fee, and charges, public loans, financing investment projects, asset management, and etc.
3. Expenditure administration, ranging from budget planning and allocation, procurement,

- concession, market intervention, disbursements, to public-private partnership management.
4. Personnel management, the notion of “position buying”, ranging from recruitment, promotion, to transfer and rotation.
 5. Political transactions, including asset declaration, election vote-buying, parliamentary vote-buying, party buying, MP buying.
 6. Judicial process, from police’s law and order enforcement, judicial corruption to jail bribery.
 7. Public service delivery, including health care, education, land registration, natural resource management, pollution control, energy management, food and drug safety, environment protection, and consumer protection, among others. Different types of corruption can be found in these areas, such as corruption in certifications, licenses, and permits, corruption in natural resource concession and privatization, corruptions in pricing and regulating public utilities, energy, and etc.

Table 1 : The 2005 survey on businessmen’s perception concerning corruptions during the past five years

Corruption arenas	increasing	No changing	decreasing
Initiate projects for personal benefits	19.3	19.3	17.5
Collusion budding	8.8	15.8	24.6
Arrange contracts with loop holds, or with wide discretions	7.0	31.6	17.5
Bias or locked specifications	12.3	28.1	15.8
Locate public infrastructure to maximize personal benefits	1.8	22.8	24.6
Use insight information for land specification.	14.0	12.3	22.8
Extraordinarily high standard prices	7.0	21.1	35.1
Nontransparent bidding process	3.5	35.1	26.3
Change construction details to help venders get away with tax evasion.	7.0	28.1	24.6
Extortion in materials, goods, and services certification	8.8	28.1	33.3
Selective certifications of materials, goods, and services to benefit venders.	0.0	26.8	25.0

Source: Adapted from Sauwanee Thairungroj 2009 Table 15, pages 32-33

Fighting corruption from the bottom

Majority of civic organizations choose a positive approach in fighting the corruption, for example civic education, monitoring situation, and information dissemination. Only some of them take aggressive roles as corruption watchdogs, unveil incidences, and push forward upon the state institutions to take action against corruption.

Corruption watchdog organizations in Thailand have different settings. Labor unions in state enterprises, medical doctor solidarity in the Ministry of Public Health, representative organizations of teacher and lecturer in public schools, collages, and universities are examples of corruption watchdogs in public organizations. Likewise, there are a number of community organizations, religious units, local radios, and newspapers are active watchdogs against corruptions in their communities. At the national level, there are the press, televisions, foundations, and some not-for-profit institutions play as the national watchdogs against corruption.

As a watchdog, a civic organization can do a good job when corruption is visible, they can bark loud enough that some ones in charged of can hear and take action in response to their voices. But, in many cases these conditions are unlikely to come together. Civic organizations often have to overcome a number of barriers to get close to corruption incidences. If there is a chance to grape the incidence, they might have difficulties to find a media that can publicized their case. And even they can find a good media that help makes the scandal known to public, it is a little chance that the state institutions will take the case into investigation process.

Note that civic organizations in Thailand are often seen as anti-state or anti-organization power players. They must take extraordinary efforts to fight with corruption. At the mean time, they are threatened by both state and outlaw agents who are involved in corruptions. Nevertheless, there are success cases to be illustrated below.

BOX1: Thailand: Integrity Indicators Scorecard 2008

1. Overall Score: 65 - **Weak**
2. Category I Civil Society, Public Information and Media 71 - **Moderate**
 - Civil Society Organizations 75 - **Moderate**
 - Media 52 - **Very Weak**
 - Public Access to Information 85 - **Strong**

Source: Global Integrity Scorecard: Thailand; <http://report.globalintegrity.org/reportPDFS/2008/Philippines.pdf>

Case illustrations

Followings are four illustrative successful cases of civic movement against corruption.

1. Mosquito eradication chemical
2. Klong Daan sewage treatment
3. Medicine and medical equipment purchasing
4. Highway bribery

1. Mosquito eradication chemical

The corruption incidence took place in the Legislative budget appropriation in 1992. Some MPs were bribed by a chemical company to put a pet project, “the mosquito eradication chemical” into the 1993 annual budget appropriation. The budget amount of Bht 143,133,800 was allocated to the “pet project,” but was intentionally misplaced under

the Department of Community Development, Ministry of Interior, rather than the Ministry of Public Health’s departments.

The press uncovered the unusual budget allocation, as well as the bribery. The budget execution was later disrupted and investigated by an order of the Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai, who came into power after the incidence had been progressed.

Case Notes:

1. The Director of Department of Community Development content that the budget proposal for mosquito eradication was not initiated by his department, as it did not the department’s mission. Nevertheless, he did not reject the budget allocation for mosquito eradication because he didn’t want to meddle political demands.
2. Having know that the budget had been misplaced by

political intention, the Director and officials of the Bureau of Budget neither interfered nor invoked the incidence, while they were in charged of correcting budget allocation among departments and ministries.

3. The corruption scandal was leaked out by MPs to the press, who later made public attention. The press and the reporter who uncovered the corruption case were afterward awarded as the best news reporter of the year 1997.
4. Neither politicians nor public officials were found guilty or being punished as a result of administrative investigation. Similar corruptions in the process of legislative budget appropriation have been accelerated up until now and likely become a “common practice”.



Wattana Assawahaem

2. Klong Daan Sewage Treatment

Klong Daan sewage treatment project was adopted in 1995, during the Prime Minister Charthai Chunawan government. It was expected to be the largest sewage treatment utility in Southeast Asia, with the total budget Bht 23,700 million. The project was located in Klong Daan Sub-district, Samudprakarn Province.

The corruption incidences took place even before the project started up. Wattana Assawahaem, the very most influence Politician in Samudprakan and the

Deputy Minister of Interior at the time being, used the project’s “insight information”, bought 17 parcels of lands, as of 1,900 Rai, from local peoples where the project will be located as of Bht 563 million, and sold out to the project owner, the Department of Pollution Control as of Bht 1,900 million. The construction bidding was started up in 1997, but was not known to local peoples until two years later, in 1999.

Klong Daan peoples, led by two community leaders, Chalao Timtong and Dawan Chantornhassadee, organized and moved against the projects, as it could have sever impacts on the community life, as well as the nontransparency of land acquisition in the project. The community leaders took an in-dept study on the land registrations and acquisition process, which revealed the facts that a number of plots of public land were illegally registered as private properties and were subsequently sold out to the project.

The community leaders present the corruption case to the National Counter Corruption Commission (NCCC), where formal investigation subsequently started up and passed over to the Attorney General in 2007, sixteen years after the case inception.

The media also came in as a partner of community organization. Jermsak Pintong, a producer and director of a TV series¹, known as “Lanban-Lanmoung” helped organized a forum for Klong Daan local people and unveiling the case through his television series.

The case was also brought up to the Senate Parliament by the community leaders and a group of senators, Jermsak Pintong, Bangkok Senator, and Charun Yangprapakorn, Samudprakarn Senator, among others, and led to an investigation. The Senate also proposes the case to NCCC.

In 2009, Wattana was sentenced ten years imprisonment by the Supreme Court, but he had escaped to a neighboring country prior to the sentence day.

Note that Klong Daan sewage treatment case incorporates a number of corruption practices, including illegal land registrations, illegal bidding and construction of waste treatment factory, and the nonperforming officials, among others. Most of these cases are in the investigation and judicial process.

Case note:

1. Other two ministers, Yingphan Manasikarn, Minister of Science and Technology, and Suwat Linpataphanlob, Deputy Minister of Science and Technology at the time being was also accused of having involved in the incidence.
2. Government officials in the Department of Pollution Control took passive role in fighting corruption, yielded to demands of politicians. Until the NCCC investigation had progressed and significant incidences had been uncovered, then the respondent officials decided to assume active roles against corruption.

3. Medicine and Medical equipment purchasing

The Ministry of Public Health had encountered two major scandals of corruption during the past twelve years. The first one, known as “Medicine and medical supply corruption,” emerged in 1998 when Rakkiat Sukhthana was the Minister of Public Health. The corruption scandal was first invoked by the Rural Doctor Solidarity, a watchdog group of doctors who worked in the remote rural hospitals. They alleged that the purchasing prices of medicines and medical supplies in 34 provinces were so unusually high that it might have some corruption in the purchasing process. Rakkiat Suksthana, the Deputy Minister of Public Health at the time was



¹ Dr. Jermsak Pintong was afterward the senator and brought up the case to the Parliamentary investigation, which had significant impacts on the case solution.

suspected to involve in the incidence. The media, the press and televisions, helped brought the scandal to public attention in a short time. The Parliament, the police, and then the NCCC took the case into investigation process.

Rakkiat was alleged by the police that he had ordered or induced his subordinates to purchase medicines and medical supplies from two colluding firms with a corrupt intention. A sum of money as of Bht 33,400,000 appeared in bank accounts of his wife. In August 1998, just before leaving the post, Rakkiat himself obtained a cashier cheque amounted to Bht 5,000,000 from the managing director of colluding firms. Chirayu Charatsathien, Rakkiat’s secretary, who was also convicted and imprisoned content that the cashier cheque of Bht 5,000,000 given to Rakkiat was considered as a payment for revoking the ceiling price and making purchasing from the colluding firms.

On October 24 2002, The NCCC ruled that Rakkiat was “unusually wealthy” and the Attorney General petitioned to seize his property, including Bht 233,000,000 in bank cash.

Corruptions in Thailand Strengthening Plan

The second scandal, started up last year (2009) and still going on, also deals with the acquisition of medical equipment and capital acquisitions. It is known as “corruption in Thailand Strengthening Plan”

The Cabinet led by the Prime Minister Apisit Vechajewa introduced the “Thailand Strengthening Plan” in 2009 as a maneuver for macro-economic stimulation. The plan was operated with limited preparation, out-off-budget scheme. The Ministry of Public Health obtained Bht 86,684.61 million, 6% of the total Thailand strengthening funds. Parts of the fund were dedicated for medical equipment and capital acquisitions for public hospitals in remote areas.



It was the Rural Medical Doctor Solidarity who provoked the corruption incidences. Leaders of the group indicated that the fund allocation and procurement process were unusual and nontransparent. In addition, specifications of medical equipments as well as their marked prices were extensively high and not corresponded with demands of many hospitals, which indicated a symptom of corruption. The media then came in and publicized the scandal.

In respond, the Cabinet established an independent investigation taskforce to unfold the incidences. In late December 2009, the taskforce commission reported finding incidences to the Cabinet. Among others, the report confirmed that the marked prices of medical equipments and capitals were unusually high. In addition, there were the concentration of fund allocation in some provinces and hospitals, especially large-scale hospitals located in cities, rather than small rural hospitals, which did not correspond with the stated policy.

The Minister of Public Health, Withaya Kaoparadai, resigned from the post in late December 2009, as to response to the scandal.

Case note:

1. The Rural Doctor Solidarity was the champion of both cases. The group has high reputation in fighting with corruption in the Ministry of Public Health, as well as in reforming the public health sector in Thailand.

2. Corruption scandals under the Thailand Strengthening Program were pervasive in other ministries. Examples were the Ministry of Transportation (the dustless roads), Ministry of Agriculture and Co-operatives, and Ministry of Education (Post Today December 31, 2006, page 1), and Ministry of Interior (budget allocated to local authorities). But none of them were formally in-

vestigated, as no watchdogs stirred up the case. It is likely possible that the Legislative body will bring up the cases to public attention and investigation.

3. The investigation task force noted that government officials in general were neither attentive nor provocative against the eroding corruption in their offices, perceived the incidences as a “common phenomena”.

4. Highway bribery

Highway bribery has long been a common type of street-level corruption anywhere in Thailand. Trucks, taxi, as well as local public transportation vehicles often pay bribes to polices in exchange of getting away with such illegal practices as speed limit and traffic law violations, overloading, drunk driver, and driving without valid licenses, among others. Highway and traffic polices

enjoy the bribes not only for themselves, but also distribute to their companions and on to their supervisors. In return, they were protected and promoted by their supervisors. Highway bribe is an example of organized crime under of the state.

In 2003 iTV, a television channel, made the highway bribery visible to the public for the first time through its broadcasting series. In response, the National Police Department adopted an investigation taskforce to uncover the incidence of the reported case. Only few street-level officials were reported as having involved in the case.

Following iTV, many other cases of highway bribery had been provoked by other watchdogs, such as TV Channel Seven, “the Real Story on TV”, TTV, community radios, local truck and transportation associations, among others. But the most admiring one was a street-level police, namely Chit Tongchit, a police lieutenant in Petchaburee Province who had dedicated his life for fighting with highway corruption and other illegalities more than a decade until he was assassinated by a group of bad polices on January 15, 2009.

Case note:

1. Highway bribes have been rampant anywhere all over the country. Its existence goes hand in hand with illegal business on the roads. Polices take highway bribery for grant as an extra incomes to compensate their low salaries.
2. Apart from Chit Tongchit, a number of civic movement leaders for counter corruption in Thailand had been assassinated in recent years. Examples were Churin Rajapol Narin Podang, Pitak Tonawood, Suwat Wongpyasatit, Chawee-wan Puksoongnern, and Charearn Wat-aksorn, among others. State power had been involved in all of these killings (Rossana Tositrakul 2005).

Looking forward: Strengthening evidence-based watchdogs

As corruption is so prevalent, Thailand needs to strengthen both state institutions in charged of crunching corruption from the top, as well as to multiply and strengthen civic corruption watchdogs that can chase and catch up corruptions from the bottom. It is necessary that the NCCC, the Parliament, and civic organization watchdogs should develop collective networking organizations, in which all parties can multiply their capability in data collection, information exchange, and case analysis, plotting, and mapping. The network should extend to the media, community radios, TV channels, the press, as well as labor union, occupational associations

or solidarity groups in public and private organizations, and university and collage students. Thailand should aim at having enough number of civic corruption watchdogs that can effectively monitor corruptions based on empirical evidences and nonpartisan in the near future.

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