

The Discourse of Decentralization in Thailand: A Study of Political, Administrative, and Financial Aspects

Sunthonchai Chopyot¹ and Somsak Samakeetham²

Abstract

The decentralization process in Thailand has been shaped by political history, economic policies, and institutional changes, but remains hindered by a centralized authority and entrenched patrimonial culture. Despite post-1997 reforms aimed at enhancing local democracy, decentralization efforts have faced challenges from political instability, limited resources, and national reluctance to relinquish control. This research employs critical discourse analysis to examine how political, administrative, and financial discourses affect power dynamics, social structures, and governance. Findings reveal ongoing struggles between national and local entities, reflecting broader societal attitudes. The study underscores the need for innovative legal and institutional reforms to address regional disparities, promote good governance, and foster equitable development in Thailand.

Keywords: Decentralization, Discourses, Thailand

INTRODUCTION

The decentralization process in Thailand has been characterized by its complexity and dynamism, shaped by a multitude of factors, including institutional reforms, economic policies, and the nation's political history. The transition of power from the central government to local authorities has been fraught with challenges (Kamnuansilpa et al., 2023; Munger, 2022). Recent efforts toward fiscal recentralization aim to guide and regulate local administrations through public funding (Nishizaki, 2023). Despite attempts to decentralize since 1997, Thailand's deep-rooted patrimonial culture has resulted in the concentration of political and economic power among oligarchic provincial elites (Gilley & Laochankham, 2024). Structural and regulatory changes accompanying the shift from agriculture to industry and services have not only hindered economic progress but have also exacerbated disparities in well-being (Kanchoochat, 2023). The country's decentralization reflects a blend of top-down and bottom-up strategies, emphasizing the necessity for ongoing policy frameworks to address regional economic inequalities and support community development initiatives.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Thailand experienced significant centralization efforts aimed at modernizing governance and consolidating authority under King Chulalongkorn (Munger, 2022). His reforms were designed to strengthen the monarchy's control over provincial regions while ensuring national unity against external colonial threats (Bishop, 2022). These reforms included the expansion and secularization of education, the reorganization of administrative structures, and the promotion of student-centered learning. The centralization of administrative power in Bangkok played a pivotal role in these efforts (Baker, Baker, & Phongpaichit, 2022). This centralization was part of a broader strategy to maintain Thailand's independence and reinforce the monarchy's power amidst the challenges posed by global colonial expansion (Rukspollmuang & Fry, 2022).

The administrative transformations of the 19th and early 20th centuries established a centralized governance structure in Siam, with Bangkok serving as its core (Suwannakij & Ivarsson, 2020). Local autonomy was restricted by the central government's appointment of provincial governors, who wielded considerable influence over local affairs (Kongkirati, 2014). Over the past century, the development of Thai local administration has highlighted the significant impact of national political stability on local governance,

¹ Ph.D Student Philosophy Program in Politics and Development Strategy, Graduate School of Social Development and Management Strategy, National Institute of Development Administration email; sunthonchai.c@msu.ac.th

² Professor Dr. Graduate School of Social Development and Management Strategy, National Institute of Development Administration email; somsak.0610@gmail.com (Corresponding Author)

underscoring the highly centralized nature of Thai administrative culture (Wise, 2019). During the decentralization period that concluded in 1997, the Provincial Administrative Organization paradoxically centralized political and economic power within provincial Thailand, consolidating authority in the hands of a few elite figures (Mala, 2017). These historical and contemporary dynamics illustrate how central control was perceived as essential for maintaining national cohesion and stability throughout the 20th century.

The movement toward decentralization, particularly evident after the adoption of the 1997 Constitution, marked a crucial step toward empowering local governments. This constitutional amendment aimed to enhance local democracy and foster public participation by reallocating administrative and financial responsibilities from the central government to local authorities (Gilley & Laochankham, 2024). Although recentralization measures have imposed limits on public debt accumulation and local government budgets, emerging perspectives suggest that central steering can, in fact, strengthen local governments by improving fiscal, economic, and policy conditions (Nishizaki, 2023). The Provincial Administrative Organization, which received significant support from the state following 1997, facilitated the consolidation of power among influential political families, thereby highlighting the paradoxical concentration of power within provincial elites (Sudhipongpracha, 2017). While the decentralization process initiated post-1997 aimed to bolster local governance, public engagement, and democratic decision-making, significant obstacles remained.

Central authorities' reluctance to relinquish power has presented considerable challenges to decentralization (Houlihan & Hickey, 2023). Local governments frequently encounter limitations in resources and expertise necessary to fulfill their expanded responsibilities. The central government's oversight of critical areas, such as revenue collection and budget allocation, constrains the financial autonomy of local administrations. Despite ongoing attempts to revitalize local autonomy and decentralization, crises related to local governance and budgetary pressures persist, undermining local competitiveness and hindering balanced regional development (Seung-Gyu, 2022). To overcome these challenges and facilitate successful decentralization, innovative legal and institutional solutions are imperative.

Political instability, marked by frequent administrative changes and military interventions, has compounded the difficulties associated with decentralization in Thailand. As discussed by Ali & Analoui (2023), the unpredictability of political leadership has resulted in inconsistent governance practices, with new administrations often seeking to consolidate power to maintain control (Bill, 2022). This observation reinforces the notion that political stability is vital for the effective implementation of decentralization principles across diverse contexts.

Despite long-standing advocacy for decentralization, numerous obstacles have hindered its realization, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic (Aschari, 2022). Although the idea of integrating decentralization with sustainability to achieve success in economic, social, and environmental domains has been explored, specific national initiatives have been insufficient (Atisa, Zemrani, & Weiss, 2021). Challenges such as inadequate funding and a lack of specialized knowledge at the local level have thwarted the full realization of decentralization's theoretical benefits, including improved local service delivery (Dick-Sagoe, 2020). The decentralization movement, which seeks to transfer decision-making authority from higher to lower levels within organizations, often faces overshadowing concerns related to national unity, security, and economic management.

Decentralization is essential for promoting local development, enhancing public service provision, and supporting democratic governance. By granting local authorities greater flexibility to respond to the needs and preferences of their communities, decentralization can lead to improved governance and reduced regional disparities through the promotion of local economic development and equitable resource allocation. However, substantial conceptual and practical barriers must be addressed to fully harness these advantages. National authorities must commit to providing local administrative organizations with adequate funding and authority. This research aims to examine the discourses surrounding decentralization that emerged in Thailand from 2014 to 2022 and their impact on local government and decentralization initiatives. It investigates how political, administrative, and financial discourses on decentralization have shaped the trajectory and effectiveness of local governance.

SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

Decentralization in governance refers to the process of transferring responsibilities, powers, and resources from national to local or regional authorities, thereby facilitating more localized decision-making (Umarov, 2023). This process is not merely administrative; it is deeply political, reflecting social values and power dynamics while influencing the implementation of policies (Di Bona et al., 2022). Scholarly analysis reveals a significant increase in publications focusing on decentralization since the 1950s, highlighting its growing importance across various fields, including computer science, political science, and economics (Siekulicki, 2022). Decentralization is a complex phenomenon characterized by multiple facets that emphasize its advantages, challenges, and the dynamics of gradual implementation. These aspects are reflected in its structural, componential, objective, and processual dimensions. In Thailand, the decentralization process has faced numerous challenges, many of which are shaped by prevailing discourses. This conceptual framework examines how political, administrative, and financial decentralization discourses undermine the country's decentralization initiatives.

Political Decentralization Concept: Political decentralization involves the transfer of political authority and decision-making powers from the national government to local governments, aiming to enhance local democracy and citizen participation.

Administrative Decentralization Concept: This concept pertains to the delegation of public service delivery and administrative responsibilities from national to local governments, thereby improving efficiency and responsiveness.

Financial Decentralization Concept: Financial decentralization relates to the transfer of fiscal responsibilities and financial resources from the national government to local governments, allowing for greater local autonomy in managing finances.

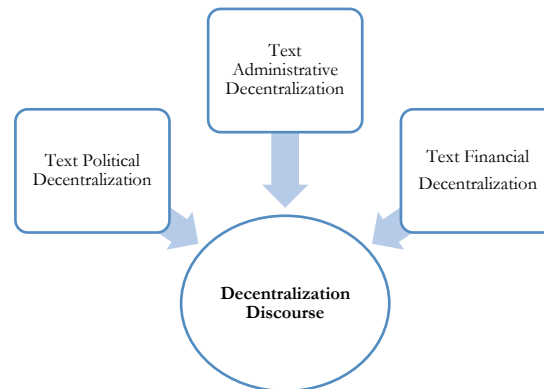


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Discourse analysis is a research technique employed to investigate spoken or written language within its social context. This approach examines how language is used in communication and explores the ways in which social structures, power dynamics, and cultural norms influence and are influenced by language (Ghafar, 2023; Guihua & Mi, 2023). By applying this methodology, researchers can better understand how language shapes reality, constructs identities, and affects relationships in specific contexts.

To explore the discourse surrounding decentralization in Thailand, this study employs a comprehensive array of qualitative methods. The objective is to provide an in-depth understanding of the factors that facilitate or hinder decentralization initiatives through an analysis of political, administrative, and financial discourses. This analytical framework guarantees a thorough and nuanced examination of the complexities associated with decentralization in Thailand.

The document analysis aspect involves gathering and scrutinizing official government documents, policy papers pertinent to decentralization, and relevant academic studies. It also includes a review of historical records, statements, and declarations made by political figures, alongside scholarly works, news articles, and online content—particularly the People's Power 65 series (Episodes 1-15) by Jomquan, as well as discussions from the Parliamentary Meeting to Liberate Local Government and proposed amendments to the Local Government Constitution. The discourse analyzed focuses on the period from 2014 to 2022.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) serves as the methodological framework for this study, concentrating on the examination of language, power, and societal dominance. It considers discourse as a form of social practice and emphasizes how meaning is constructed socially (Zakirova, 2023; Mehmood, 2023). By investigating the social and political factors that shape discourse, CDA addresses societal practices and challenges existing power structures (Naidu et al., 2023). This

approach integrates macro-level social analysis with micro-level linguistic analysis to comprehend the interplay between language and society, particularly in relation to power dynamics and social inequalities (Khudhair, 2022).

RESULTS

The texts written during Thailand's decentralization era following the coup in 2014 reflect the prevailing narratives that shaped that process. Decentralization ultimately came to an end because of the reinforcement of decentralization and local administration difficulties in many of these discourses. The decentralization framework, which includes the division of political authority, decentralization of the administrative process, and decentralization of the fiscal system, can be used to examine these texts. It can be summed up as follows:

Political Decentralization Discourse

First, the issue of vote-buying in local politics is a longstanding problem in Thai society and its electoral system, closely linked to the political structure. The socio-economic and cultural influences on the use of money to buy votes vary by region and electoral level. It is not accurate to generalize that the highest-paying candidate always wins the election. Various factors contribute to success in local elections, including the candidate's reputation, qualifications, family and relatives' influence, canvassing system, campaign policy guidelines, support from national political parties, national political trends, and the candidate's performance during their tenure. However, after the election of administrators and local council members, there have been significant changes, with over 70 percent of local administrators being replaced.

Second, local politicians often emerge from a group of local influencers, or "expansive people," who are well-known in various areas. This situation strengthens the patronage system, especially as political competition at the national level intensifies. The patronage system in local politics is thus intertwined with national politics and serves as a foundation for national political power. These networks influence budget allocation, particularly with the centralized budget system and the lack of transparency in subsidy distribution to local areas, further intertwining national and local politicians. However, if local influencers enter the electoral system, they must be accountable to the people's power and face term limits in local political positions. If local politicians lack the ability to effectively implement policies for area development, the electorate will decide their political future. In this context, influence might not follow the traditional "godfather" or criminal model but could instead be based on policy and developmental ideas that yield tangible results for the local community. The political decisions of the people will determine whether politicians should continue or exit the political stage. Therefore, a new kind of influence, characterized by positive policy impact and local development, could emerge, moving away from the old patronage system.

Third, local politicians are often perceived as lacking knowledge and management experience. This perception is highlighted in reports on the challenges faced by local administrators. According to a 2015 study by the Local Administrative Commission of the National Legislative Assembly, the central government views local administrators as generally lacking in political awareness and expertise. This perception is linked to issues of transparency in the election process and the preparedness of the electorate, leading to a stereotype that local politicians are unqualified to manage local affairs. However, the study found that most local administrators, including elected officials and permanent civil servants, are well-educated and possess substantial knowledge and skills. Continuous development and improvement of their abilities are common. For example, 40.91 percent of local government organization presidents hold higher education degrees beyond a bachelor's, and 37.27 percent have a bachelor's degree. This demonstrates that many local administrators have the qualifications necessary to effectively manage their areas, contrary to the stereotype.

Fourth, people are not yet ready for self-government and conflict in local politics. Local government is based on the principle of allowing people to learn about self-governance, as these organizations are fundamentally close to the citizens. However, throughout the decentralization process, the readiness of local communities to govern themselves has been questioned from both national and local political perspectives. The prevailing narrative suggests that people are not prepared for self-government, reinforcing a discourse that hinders rural development by viewing local populations as "too ignorant to manage themselves." This perspective diminishes the value of local citizens, portraying them as incapable and insignificant. Consequently, this view promotes the use of power that does not originate from the people, particularly through bureaucratic mechanisms that extend

their role in providing public services and freezing local politics. The National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) views politics as a source of conflict and seeks to avoid political disputes at all levels. They perceive politics as dirty and undesirable, marginalizing the importance of learning about democratic processes and exercising citizens' rights. This has been replaced by a discourse focused on creating peace and order, idealizing a simple, conflict-free past while overlooking the realities of social and political change.

Fifth, the decentralization of power has not yet truly reached the hands of the people. This has been a longstanding concern, as local government organizations often centralize power within themselves. The Reform Committee views this issue as rooted in the public's lack of engagement and specific knowledge about local government operations, which hampers their ability to effectively oversee these organizations. There is a prevailing perception that people do not recognize the importance of participating in local government administration, viewing them merely as passive recipients of services rather than active participants in local governance. This mindset reinforces the dominance of local government organizations over the actual empowerment of the people. Even though there are mechanisms for public involvement, such as proposing local ordinances or removing local administrators (with four successful removals out of more than thirteen requests by 2011), these efforts reflect only a partial awareness and exercise of political rights by local people. The existing systems may not be conducive to full public participation, particularly in budget usage and evaluation, beyond their involvement in local planning. Participation is often limited to formalities rather than meaningful engagement in governance processes.

Sixth, efforts to expand the role of central and provincial bureaucracies in local administration have been notable. The 2017 Constitution, while ostensibly supporting decentralization and local governance, has instead reinforced traditional systems and mechanisms at the regional level. In December 2014, the Center for Local Development Studies at Thammasat University's Sanya Dharmasakti Institute for Democracy organized the first brainstorming project to design the Thai local government system. Meechai (2014) suggested that the term "region" should be removed from the constitution, leaving only central and local government departments in accordance with public administration laws and regulations. This approach is believed to simplify operations by placing the issue of decentralization under public administration law rather than at the constitutional level. Additionally, the meeting proposed restructuring regional government administration to give regional governments a significant role in setting regional strategies, supervising local government organizations, and coordinating plans at the provincial level. This shift reflects an effort to maintain traditional bureaucratic control over local administration while ostensibly addressing the need for decentralization.

Administrative Decentralization Discourse

First, local administration is perceived as lacking transparency. The sociopolitical perspective on local administration is dominated by a belief in its inherent non-transparency and efforts to undermine its legitimacy by portraying it as a corrupt twilight zone of power, often controlled by so-called godfathers. This narrative suggests widespread corruption and political conflicts at the local level. The dominant discourse within the social and bureaucratic system views local government as inherently non-transparent and corrupt, a view frequently reinforced by the media. A persistent myth is that local corruption and exploitation are more prevalent, and local governments are less prepared for proper governance. While complaints about local governance may be numerous, judicial rulings often reveal that the actual monetary damage is relatively low compared to central government figures. According to audit data from the Office of the Auditor General from 2014-2021, the total monetary damage found in audits was over 292,549.19 million baht. Of this, central and regional governments accounted for 141,279.06 million baht (48.29 percent), whereas local government organizations, which are fewer in number, accounted for only 32,604.88 million baht (11.15 percent). These discourses have effectively impeded the decentralization process. However, the audit data suggests that local governments may not be as disproportionately corrupt as commonly believed, highlighting the need to reassess these perceptions.

Second, local governments were not ready to accept the transfer of responsibilities. The current model of decentralization has reached an impasse, particularly in the symmetrical transfer of duties according to the decentralization plan, which does not account for the varying sizes and capabilities of local government

organizations. Some local governments even wish to return transferred responsibilities. The legal framework emphasizes transferring duties to local administrative organizations, but issues arise from the central government's insincerity and the unpreparedness of local agencies to accept certain tasks. Additionally, some powers are transferred to larger localities when smaller ones cannot manage them, such as the transfer of a Subdistrict Health Promotion Hospital to a Provincial Administrative Organization. Throughout this process, there has been opposition from existing power groups and the creation of conditions that complicate and delay transfers. An important task for the groups that have accepted these transfers is to effectively manage facilities like the Subdistrict Health Promotion Hospital, ensuring good results while remaining under the scrutiny of the original mission agency. This represents a significant challenge in developing the transferred public service system within local administrative organizations.

Third, corruption in local personnel administration is a significant issue. Local personnel management plays a crucial role in driving local policy. The Thai local personnel management system is a hybrid model, combining the staffing system of local government units with the national local staffing system. This means that personnel management authority is shared between individual local government organizations and a central national body, although local personnel are considered to belong to their respective local units. Administrative requirements, however, are governed by a committee system. Corruption in the examination process for selecting individuals to work in local government units has been reported periodically, like issues in the Royal Thai Police and district school examinations. Addressing this problem should not involve centralizing personnel management, as local characteristics necessitate that local people be able to work and participate in area development. This principle must be acknowledged. Corruption cases should be addressed through the judicial process on an individual basis.

Fourth, local independence and central control. According to a study by Kruathep et al. (2023), it was found that local government organizations in Thailand possess only a moderate level of independence. The degree of local autonomy varies by area, with the top three areas where local governments are considered most independent being policy making and decision making, control over work success, and politics and supervision from the state. Conversely, local autonomy is significantly limited in fiscal and budgetary matters, public service provision, legal aspects, and obtaining protections. Specifically, the taxing power of local administrative organizations is restricted, preventing them from collecting new types of revenue, resulting in insufficient total income to fulfill their responsibilities. Consequently, they must rely heavily on allocated taxes or government subsidies. While local government organizations are generally free to provide basic public services or handle routine tasks, they struggle with new challenges or more complex responsibilities due to a lack of a legal framework granting them the necessary authority and duties. Furthermore, there are often no supporting regulations for the operations or budget disbursement of local administrative organizations as needed.

Fifth, local administration is not standardized and inefficient. When power is decentralized to local government organizations, there is concern among the agencies transferring responsibilities about the standards and efficiency of the work. Given the numerous local government organizations, some transferred duties raise questions and doubts from the transferring agency, which often fears losing control, particularly in areas such as education administration and public health care. However, a study by King Prajadhipok's Institute found that between 2005 and 2016, an average of 44.99 percent of citizens used services provided by local government organizations, with over 88.35 percent of users expressing satisfaction with these services. From 2014 to 2016, more than 90 percent of service users reported satisfaction with local government services. Additionally, in terms of public confidence in local government from 2012 to 2016, over 60 percent of people expressed confidence in the work of local government organizations, and more than 60 percent had expectations that these organizations would take care of the lives of the local populace and operate with transparency.

Sixth, overlapping powers and duties of local government agencies. A significant issue with the authority of local government agencies is the lack of clear designation of their roles in providing public services. While local government organizations are intended to play a primary role in service delivery, their specific authority and duties are often not well-defined. Instead, the roles of central and provincial government agencies are more clearly specified. This lack of clear local authority prevents local government organizations from fully managing public services. At the same time, certain powers that are not within the local jurisdiction, such as foreign affairs,

finance, judicial processes, and security, should be clearly delineated. The principle should state only what local authorities cannot do, highlighting the wide range of public services that localities can provide if they are not prohibited by law. Addressing this issue may require a shift in thinking and a reform of the bureaucratic system, alongside local government reform, when political opportunities arise.

Financial Decentralization Discourse

First, local politicians are perceived as corrupt in local administration. According to a survey by King Prajadhipok's Institute (2022: 230-231) on public opinions about corruption in local government organizations, over 57.50 percent of people believe there is corruption and bribery in these organizations. Additionally, more than 40.80 percent of the public think that some officials or personnel within these organizations are involved in such activities. Interestingly, more than 64.70 percent of people agree that corruption and bribery are more prevalent in national governance, with a growing perception that national governance is more corrupt and prone to bribery than local governance. This evolving view suggests that the narrative of local corruption has been reinforced by the state to hinder full decentralization to local areas.

Second, local administration income is insufficient. Following the COVID-19 outbreak, the fiscal situation for the government has become strained. It has pursued expansionary fiscal policies and deficit budgeting for many years, impacting the economic system and revenue collection for both central and local governments. If local government organizations do not adapt by improving and developing their tax collection systems and rely solely on government subsidies, their financial independence and autonomy will inevitably be compromised. At the macro level, laws and regulations concerning new types of taxes need to be improved, including expanding local tax rates and bases and revising tax allocation. Additionally, the transfer of responsibilities to local government organizations has been substantial, but the transfer of personnel and budget has not increased proportionately to support local duties. The draft plan for decentralization to local government organizations (No. 3, 2020-2022) addresses this issue by setting the principle of "jobs go, money goes, positions go" for the transfer of government personnel. However, the government's budget allocation remains insufficient to carry out these missions. Local governments not only need new sources of income but must also manage existing revenue sources affected by government policies, such as tax reductions during the COVID-19 outbreak. For example, there were reductions in land and building taxes and cester fees, but no adequate compensation from government revenue to meet the expected rates.

Third, local fiscal independence is limited. Local fiscal issues have persisted for a long time, particularly concerning the revenue proportion between the government and local administrative organizations. There are limited sources of income and restricted autonomy in determining revenue collection methods. Additionally, there are restrictions on access to local financing, compounded by criteria and conditions for spending money set by the Ministry of Interior's regulations and orders. This results in inflexible budget management. Moreover, unclear laws and regulations lead to interpretive problems and inconsistencies with current situations. For example, using the budget to organize annual Songkran traditional dance activities is seen as an exercise of power by inspection units to control local areas, limiting local independence in budget decisions for cultural traditions and other local matters. This situation poses a risk to the long-term provision of public services by local government organizations.

Fourth, the Subdistrict Administrative Organization is not ready to borrow money and lacks fiscal discipline. According to fiscal management principles, loans are a significant source of government income, applicable at the local level for investment purposes. Municipalities, Provincial Administrative Organizations, and Pattaya City can borrow money for local development and investment. However, the Subdistrict Administrative Organization faces significant challenges, as existing laws do not facilitate borrowing. A study on the borrowing needs of Thai local government organizations, focusing on sub-district municipalities and sub-district administrative organizations, revealed that most local governments see a need for borrowing money. Subdistrict Administrative Organizations require borrowing due to budget limitations. Despite this need, from 1994 to 2014—over two decades—no regulations were issued by the Ministry of Interior to grant sub-district administrative organizations the authority to borrow money. This lack of regulatory support has persisted, with no Ministry of Interior guidelines issued for more than three decades. It was only in 2020 that guidelines for

sub-district administrative organizations to borrow money were introduced. However, these guidelines remain unclear and complex, hindering effective implementation and access to necessary funds for local development.

Fifth, local fiscal reform has had unintended consequences. The reform of land and building taxes has had unexpected results. In 2015, the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) government attempted to enact a property tax law, or land and building tax. The Ministry of Finance proposed the draft law, which was approved by the Council of State and submitted to the Cabinet. The concept of property tax in Thailand has been around since 1977, representing over 42 years of deliberation on this issue. The Land and Buildings Tax Law was finally enacted in 2019, combining house and land taxes with local maintenance taxes. The primary aim of this law was to ensure that property taxes would not burden the people while generating revenue for local government organizations, thereby fostering their fiscal independence and self-reliance.

DISCUSSION

Discourse analysis involves critiquing how discourses related to decentralization reflect and influence social structures, power relations, and cultural norms. By considering Thailand's unique political, social, and historical context, the analysis can reveal the deeper impact of decentralization efforts on Thai society. The discourse on decentralization in Thailand has arisen from the continuous power struggle among central agencies, local authorities, and other stakeholders such as military organizations and civil society (Kooyai & Jitpiromsri, 2024).

The language used in policy documents, political discussions, media coverage, and public debate on decentralization reveals both supportive and dominant ideologies. These discourses establish a decentralization framework relevant to democracy, development, and national unity. Notably, the concept of national unity has often led to a reduction in local diversity, attempting to make localities more bureaucratic and less political.

By analyzing the representation of various stakeholders—local government organizations, local communities, and government agencies—in the decentralization discourse, we can identify whose interests or organizations are prioritized or marginalized. This reflects broader social attitudes towards diversity of thought in society. Language shapes our understanding of local governance and decentralization; it indicates how legitimacy and power are created and contested in Thai society. Arguments in decentralization theory have been used to justify or contest decentralization, linking it to social practices and norms, including administrative management, civic participation, and public responsibility. This reflects society's expectations and challenges related to implementing decentralization in Thailand.

A closer look at decentralization discourse through critical discourse analysis (CDA) can assess how language influences decentralization policies and practices in Thailand. This includes how discourse shapes policymaking, implementation, and public perception of decentralization outcomes. The language produced to portray decentralization and local government as problematic is a primary discourse that influences the direction of decentralization and emphasizes the legitimation of centralized power, leading to widespread local compression effects. This includes the legal structure of the state and guidelines hidden in laws detailing practices established by the central state (Febriandiela et al., 2024; Chamchong, 2023).

Analyzing the discourse of decentralization in Thailand through critical discourse analysis offers insights into how language functions as a tool of power and reflects social dynamics, balancing state and people power. It highlights the challenges and opportunities inherent in decentralization efforts, revealing the different ways these processes have influenced Thailand's broader social, political, and cultural landscape. Such analysis is critical to understanding decentralization's potential to promote good governance, democracy, and more efficient management, ensuring no one is left behind. Through this lens, the discourse on decentralization becomes a dynamic field of competition and negotiation, reflecting Thailand's continuous journey towards social change and deeper democratic development.

Limitation And Future Research Directions

There are a few drawbacks to this study that need to be noted. First, the discourse analysis's scope is restricted to Thailand's decentralization of politics, government, and economy between 2014 and 2022. Hence, it's possible that some of the larger cultural and social influences on decentralization that existed before this time have not been adequately addressed. The study may not be able to evaluate the direct effects of decentralization policies numerically due to its emphasis on critical discourse analysis, although offering profound insights into language and power dynamics.

Secondly, a significant portion of the secondary data included in this study came from government records, news articles, and policy papers. As such, it may not offer a complete picture of the unofficial or regionalized narratives that exist within communities. This makes it more difficult to comprehend how decentralization is perceived at the grassroots level and how these discourses are created and sustained outside of the official political setting.

CONCLUSION

The conversation in Thailand over decentralization exposes ingrained issues, particularly the opposition to giving local government more authority over the federal government. Reinforcing a centralized system, political, administrative, and financial barriers persist in impeding the process. Economic limitations, the power of local elites, and political unpredictability have all conspired to impede decentralization attempts, despite efforts that date back to 1997.

This study emphasizes the important influence of language on decentralization policy through critical discourse analysis. Transferring power to local organizations is hampered by prevailing myths that portray local governance as corrupt or ineffective. Furthermore, the national government's unwillingness to relinquish authority has been a recurring subject, particularly when it comes to economic issues, where local governments struggle due to their lack of resources and financial autonomy.

To overcome these challenges going forward, creative legislative frameworks and a change in political will are needed. Thailand cannot hope to establish a more sustainable and equitable local governance system unless it addresses the conceptual and practical issues that have impeded decentralization initiatives. The report underlines how critical it is to keep pushing for legislative frameworks that put community development, local autonomy, and democratic government first.

In conclusion, discourse plays a crucial role in upholding the status quo, and the decentralization process in Thailand reflects larger power struggles between national and local authorities. To promote effective and democratic local governance and guarantee that the advantages of decentralization are realized by the populace, it is imperative to break down these discursive obstacles.

Acknowledgement

This article is part of the dissertation titled "Critical Discourse Analysis on the Decentralization of Power to Thai Localities (2014-2022)," submitted for the Doctor of Philosophy Program in Politics and Development Strategy at NIDA. The author gratefully acknowledges the educational funding provided by Maharakham University, the Constitutional Court, and Professor Boonchana and Sae Atthakorn Foundation for supporting this research and education.

REFERENCES

- Ali, A., & Analoui, F. (2023). Decentralisation by military regimes and challenges to citizen participation: an empirical reflection from Pakistan. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 10(1), 1-10.
- Aschari, C. (2022). Decentralization By Local Governments In The Face Of The Covid-19 Pandemic. *Jurnal Terapan Pemerintahan Minangkabau*, 2(1):26-34.
- Atisa, G., Zemrani, A., & Weiss, M. (2021). Decentralized governments: local empowerment and sustainable development challenges in Africa. *Environment, Development and Sustainability*, 23, 3349-3367.
- Baker, C., Baker, C. J., & Phongpaichit, P. (2022). *A history of Thailand*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bill, D. B. A. (2022). THE EFFECT OF POLITICAL INSTABILITY IN COUNTRY PROSPERITY. *IJRDO-Journal of Social Science and Humanities Research*, 8(11), 100-102.

- Bishop, S. (2022). Constitutional bricolage: Thailand's sacred monarchy vs. the rule of law.
- Chamchong, P. (2023). Policy analysis in Thai local governments. In *Policy Analysis in Thailand* (pp. 67-87). Policy Press.
- Center for Local Development Studies. (2014). Project to brainstorm ideas for the design of the Thai local government system No. 1. Bangkok: Sanya Thammasak Institute for Democracy. Thammasat University.
- Di Bona, G., Bracci, A., Perra, N., Latora, V., & Baronchelli, A. (2022). The decentralized evolution of decentralization across fields: from Governance to Blockchain.
- Dick-Sagoe, C. (2020). Decentralization for improving the provision of public services in developing countries: A critical review. *Cogent Economics & Finance*, 8(1), 1804036.
- Ghafar, Z. N. (2023). Discourse Analysis in Language Education: Implications for English Language Training and Learning: An Overview. *European Journal of Theoretical and Applied Sciences*, 1(3), 65-72.
- Gilley, B., & Laochankham, S. (2024). Can Fiscal Recentralization Strengthen Local Government? The Case of Thailand. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 47(4), 257-268.
- Gilley, B., & Laochankham, S. (2024). Can Fiscal Recentralization Strengthen Local Government? The Case of Thailand. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 47(4), 257-268.
- Guihua, L., & Mi, L. (2023). The Concepts of Discourse and the Theoretical Genealogy of Discourse Analysis. *Social Science Research Frontiers*, 2(2), 59.
- Guihua, L., & Mi, L. (2023). The Concepts of Discourse and the Theoretical Genealogy of Discourse Analysis. *Social Science Research Frontiers*, 2(2), 59.
- Harahap, A. R. J., Al-Anshori, M. F., & Kartini, K. (2022). Metode Analisis Wacana Dalam Media Sosial. *Dakwatussifa: Journal of Da'wah and Communication*, 1(2), 105-115.
- Houlihan, E. C., & Hickey, S. P. (2023). Constitutional Approaches to Decentralization: Elements, Challenges and Implications: Fourth Women Constitution-Makers' Dialogue, 2022. International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA).
- Kamnuansilpa, P., Timofeev, A., Lowatcharin, G., Laochankham, S., Zumitzavan, V., Ronghanam, P., ... & Mahasirikul, N. (2023). Local economic development in Thailand. *Journal of International Development*, 35(7), 1852-1873.
- Kanchoochat, V. (2023). Siamese twin troubles: Structural and regulatory transformations in unequal Thailand. *Asian Economic Policy Review*, 18(1), 47-68.
- Khudhair, Z. A. H. (2022). A Critical Discourse Analysis of Prophet Muhammad's (Peace be upon him and his household) Ideology in his Sermon to Al-Imam Ali (Peace Be Upon Him). *AL-AMEED JOURNAL*, 11(4).
- Kongkirati, P. (2014). The rise and fall of electoral violence in Thailand: Changing rules, structures and power landscapes, 1997–2011. *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs*, 36(3), 386-416.
- Kooyai, K., & Jitpiromsri, S. (2024). Critical policy discourse analysis on the conflict resolution in Thailand's deep South. *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, 51(2), 117-138.
- Kruathap, W. et al.(2023). Final Report Promoting the role of local government organizations in enhancing community health through mercury indicators of independence of local government organizations. Bangkok: Community Health Support Office (Bureau 3), Health Promotion Foundation (Thai Health Promotion Foundation).
- Mala,T. (2017). 120 Years of Thai Local Administration (2440 – 2560 B.E.): Evolution and Historical Conditions of Thai State. 5(1):343-356.
- Mehmood, S. T. (2023). Critical Discourse Analysis of Emma Watson's Speech at 'He for She' Campaign. *Sindh Journal of Linguistics*, 2(1), 51-60.
- Munger, F. W. (2022). Thailand's Monarchy and Constitutional History-Constitutional Bricolage: Thailand's Sacred Monarchy vs. the Rule of Law. By Eugenie Méricau. London: Hart Publishing, 2021, 328 pp. Hardcover \$90.00. *Asian Journal of Law and Society*, 9(3), 460-462.
- Naidu, J., Paolucci, E. O., & Turin, T. C. (2023). A critical Lens on Health: Key Principles of critical discourse analysis and its benefits to Anti-Racism in Population Public Health Research. *Societies*, 13(2), 42.
- Nishizaki, Y. (2023). Family Ties that Bind: Decentralisation, Local Elites and the Provincial Administrative Organisations in Thailand. *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and-National Studies of Southeast Asia*, 11(1), 45-70.
- Oleshkova, A. M. (2023). Discourses and epistems as contexts of the dispersion of "newspeak" (based on the philosophy of M. Foucault). *Sociopolitical Sciences*, 13(2), 123-130.
- Ostermann, F., & Sjøstedt, R. (2022). Discourse analysis and discourse theories. In *Routledge Handbook of Foreign Policy Analysis Methods* (pp. 101-116). Routledge.
- Rukspollmuang, C., & Fry, G. W. (2022). Overview of Education in Thailand. In *International Handbook on Education in South East Asia* (pp. 1-31). Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore.
- Seung-Gyu, O. (2022). Expansion of self-governing financial power in harmony with the rule of law. *Hapshin theological review*, 33(4):135-167.
- Siekulicki, D. (2022). Decentralizacja–podstawowe zagadnienia teoretyczne. *Politeja-Pismo Wydziału Studiów Międzynarodowych i Politycznych Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego*, 19(77), 19-33.
- Sudhipongpracha, T. (2017). Do the poor count in fiscal decentralization policy? A comparative analysis of the general grant allocation systems in Indonesia and Thailand. *Journal of Asian Public Policy*, 10(3), 231-248.

The Discourse of Decentralization in Thailand: A Study of Political, Administrative, and Financial Aspects

- Suwannakij, S., & Ivarsson, S. (2020). Inscribing Siam: The state of documentary and spatial practices. *Modern Asian Studies*, 54(5), 1596-1630.
- Umarov, B. (2023). THE ROLE OF THE PRINCIPLES OF DECENTRALIZATION IN THE CONCEPT OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION. *The American Journal of Political Science Law and Criminology*, 5(02), 62-68.
- Wise, J. (2019). Thailand: history, politics and the rule of law. Marshall Cavendish International Asia Pte Ltd.
- Zakirova, B. B. (2023). CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS. *Builders Of The Future*, 1(01).
- Febriandiela, F., Frinaldi, A., & Magriasti, L. (2024). Critical Analysis of Decentralization Theory in the Context of Local Government: A Literature Review. *Adabi: Journal of Public Administration and Business*, 11(1), 1-13.