

# The Political Frontier of Rubber Plantations in Northeastern Thailand

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The promotion of rubber plantations in Northeastern Thailand has significantly shaped the region's political and socioeconomic landscape. Originally introduced to an economically marginalized, arid area, rubber cultivation gained momentum as Thailand transitioned from military-dominated rule to an electoral system in the late 1980s—a period marked by the rise of provincial business networks and increased civil society engagement in politics. With the Northeast holding a substantial portion of parliamentary seats, rubber plantations elevated the region's political relevance within Thailand. This impact became particularly evident in the 2000s, when electoral politics reached its peak. Drawing on surveys, stakeholder interviews, and field research, this article examines the contested political power surrounding rubber plantation policies. Analyzing dynamics at the national, provincial, and community levels, the study illustrates how rubber policy frameworks were shaped by different political regimes, how political networks were mobilized through various channels, and how these forces influenced local communities engaged in rubber cultivation.

**Keywords:** Thai politics, Northeastern Thailand, rubber plantations, democratization, provincial politics

## Introduction

Thailand is the world's largest exporter of natural rubber, accounting for around 30 percent of global exports by value (Statista Research Department 2024). Although rubber planting began in the 1930s, significant promotion efforts were not initiated until 1959, focusing primarily on the southern region, following recommendations from the World Bank (World Bank 1959, 5). These efforts were bolstered by the Rubber Planting Aid Fund Act of 1960, which directed substantial government funding exclusively to plantations in the South for several decades. It was only in 1989, with the launch of the

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Green Isan megaproject led by Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan, that rubber cultivation was formally introduced to the Northeast. Later, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra expanded these efforts through the One Million Rai Rubber Planting initiative (referred to here as “One-Million Rai”),<sup>1)</sup> which specifically targeted rubber cultivation in the Northeast.

The delayed introduction of rubber to the Northeast—beginning 30 years after its establishment in the South—has had a profound impact on the region’s economy and society. While many studies have examined the socioeconomic effects of these changes, the political dimensions of rubber cultivation remain underexplored. Rubber, as a high-value crop, holds economic significance; however, its cultivation and management have also become highly politicized, from decision-making processes to local implementation.

This article, based on research conducted from 2015 to 2017 that employed documentary analysis, observation, and interviews, investigates the political landscape surrounding rubber cultivation in Northeast Thailand. It is structured in three sections: the first explores national politics and rubber plantation promotion, outlining the policy framework, national context, and political forces influencing rubber policies in the Northeast. The second section analyzes provincial policy implementation through case studies of prominent rubber promoters in the Northeast. The final section examines the impact of rubber cultivation on local communities, focusing on how policies have shaped the livelihoods and social structures of residents.

## National Power Play in Northeast Rubber: From Semi-Democracy to Electoral Politics

### *Isan in Thailand’s National Politics, 1933–Present*

Isan, Thailand’s northeastern region, is often associated with poverty and limited educational opportunities, partly because many residents work as migrant laborers. However, the Northeast has a rich political history marked by both oppression and resistance. From 1933 to 1951, several northeastern politicians gained national prominence; however, four left-leaning ministers were murdered on suspicion of communist sympathies, leading the central government to take measures to diminish the region’s political power (Dararat 2000). The Northeast also faced delayed infrastructure development due to governmental neglect, which persisted until the Vietnam War era, when strategic projects like highways and airports were established. Numerous state-sponsored development proj-

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1) A rai [ไร่ ไร่] is a unit of area equal to 1,600 square meters (0.16 hectares, 0.3954 acres) and is used in measuring land in Thailand.

ects were subsequently implemented, though often more for propaganda and state security than for genuinely improving the livelihoods of the region's people (Viyuth 1993).

The political shifts that began in the 1990s materialized fully in 2001 with the implementation of pro-poor policies that turned national attention toward the North and Northeast. The newly founded Thai Rak Thai Party won a decisive majority in that year's election, securing 248 out of 500 parliamentary seats, with 126 from the Northeast alone. This success was largely attributed to popular policies like universal healthcare and the Thailand Village Fund, which resonated strongly across rural areas. These initiatives paved the way for Thai Rak Thai's landslide victory in 2005 and sustained success in later elections.

However, by 2006, anti-Thaksin sentiments began to emerge, particularly among conservative elites and establishment groups who felt their influence waning. Compared to the rural poor, the urban middle class benefited less from Thai Rak Thai's policies and joined the opposition. This coalition evolved into the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), commonly known as the Yellow Shirts, and accused Thaksin and Thai Rak Thai of winning elections—especially in the Northeast—through vote-buying from poor, rural voters (Prajak 2012, 3).

This opposition movement eventually led to the 2006 coup that ousted Thaksin from power, sparking the rise of the pro-Thaksin Red Shirts in response. Residents of the Northeast and the North comprised a significant portion of the Red Shirts movement, as they had benefited considerably from Thaksin's policies. Driven by poverty, marginalization, and resentment toward the elite who had supported the coup, the Red Shirts voiced frustration over what they saw as a disregard for the rural electorate's votes. While the Yellow Shirts, despite their anti-democratic stance, received backing from authorities and the Bangkok middle class, the Red Shirts were often labeled as violent extremists or even terrorists. This perception of a "double standard" within the socio-political system deepened their sense of injustice (Apichat *et al.* 2013, 55–58).

People from the Northeast, in particular, became a central force within the Red Shirts movement, which scholars attribute to their adaptability to shifting socioeconomic conditions and their nuanced understanding of rights and justice. Despite their political awareness and resilience, people in the Northeast continued to face profound economic inequalities (Keyes 2014; Pattana 2014; Kanokwan 2016).

### *Rubber Promotion Begins: The Green Isan Project*

The naming of the Green Isan Project (โครงการอีสานเขียว), formally titled "His Majesty the King's Mercifulness for the Development of the Northeastern Region in Accordance with His Royal Initiatives," illustrates the tradition of elaborate titles for state-led, particularly

royal, projects in Thailand. Initially forming part of the Royal Thai Army's rural development agenda, the project originated from King Bhumipol's suggestion in March 1987 to then-Commander-in-Chief General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh to address the drought situation in the Northeast. Chavalit capitalized on the suggestion, presenting a comprehensive development plan for the region to Prime Minister General Prem Tinsulanonda, which included the Green Isan Project. With the rainy season in the Northeast lasting only from August to September, the limited precipitation provided a compelling rationale to implement the plan.

As a first step, Prem acted swiftly to authorize the Royal Thai Army's Northeast water-supply relief program within just three days. Military water-truck convoys were publicly showcased at the Royal Plaza and televised nationwide during the project's inauguration (Army Weekly Newspaper 1991). This highly ceremonial approach reflected the 1980s model of welfare provision, where the state, through bureaucratic and military channels, appeared to extend a form of paternalistic generosity to its less privileged subjects in rural areas.

In response to Chavalit's recommendation, Prime Minister Prem established a center under the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) to oversee and coordinate efforts within the Green Isan Project. Although ISOC was primarily a security agency, it had significantly expanded its role during the Cold War by engaging in rural development to counter communist influence. This involvement in rural development allowed ISOC to maintain its influence even after the Cold War. Puangthong (2017, 22–25) notes that ISOC became instrumental in securing authoritarian regimes after the coups of 2006 and 2014.

The center for the Green Isan Project, operating within ISOC, was tasked with regulating policy and managing both governmental and non-governmental actors in line with the project's objectives. Initially, its focus was on short-term solutions to immediate crises, such as water scarcity. This involved using military resources to enhance natural water supplies, most notably through artificial rain-making, commonly known as "The Royal Rain." The operations were carried out by various state entities, including the Royal Thai Army, the Royal Thai Navy, the Royal Thai Air Force, the Department of Police, and the Royal Rainmaking Operation Office,<sup>2)</sup> with funding totaling 55 billion baht for the 1988–93 fiscal period (Thammaniti Press 1989, 36).

To further its aim of boosting agricultural incomes, the Green Isan Project included

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2) The Royal Rainmaking Operation Office was initially under the Office of the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives (MoAC). In 1992, it was elevated to the status of a department within the Ministry and renamed the Department of Royal Rainmaking and Agricultural Aviation.

two phases of a rubber promotion program. The first phase (1989–93) received approval from Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan, the first elected prime minister since 1976. In this phase, the Office of the Rubber Replanting Aid Fund (ORRAF) provided subsidies to establish rubber plantations on 156,250 rai in the Northeast. This initiative was generously funded, with a cabinet-approved budget allocation of 419.87 million baht on June 20, 1989. The second phase (1997–2001), endorsed by Prime Minister Banharn Silpa-archa, saw the budget expand to 735.61 million baht, adding an additional 200,000 rai of rubber plantations. This initiative paralleled a similar rubber project in southern Thailand, supported by a World Bank loan of USD 60 million and an additional GBP 10 million from the Commonwealth Development Corporation (CDC). These funds were used to supplement subsidies for rubber planting promotion in the South between 1987 and 1990, with a target of covering 1.25 million rai.

### *The Northeast Emerges on the Political Landscape*

At the heart of the Green Isan Project was General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, whose political and military career was grounded in the belief that socioeconomic inequality was a root cause of insurgency and that addressing it was essential for a stable democratic regime (Baker and Pasuk 2014, 238). As a key member of the “Democratic Soldiers” faction, Chavalit aimed to alleviate rural poverty to counter communist influence. He played a crucial role in negotiating an end to the civil conflict with the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) and later resigned as army commander-in-chief in 1990 to establish the New Aspiration Party. This party focused on economic development and security, especially in rural areas, gaining significant support in the Northeast. It won 37 seats in the 1992 election, later expanding to 125 seats in 1996—a record for a single party at that time—and propelling Chavalit to the role of Thailand’s prime minister. During his brief tenure, rubber cultivation in the Northeast expanded rapidly. Krit Kongpetch, a Northeastern Member of Parliament (MP) and Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives (MoAC), secured an increased 4.5 billion baht-budget through ORRAF to further support rubber farmers (Phuchatkanraiwan 1997, 5).

The political landscape in which Chavalit operated during the 1980s was characterized as a “semi-democratic regime,” where elections played an important role but were largely confined to parliamentary politics. Though businessmen gained influence in parliament, the military, elites, and monarchical networks retained control over key political decisions. The Green Isan Project, framed as an initiative under royal patronage, benefited from its association with the monarchy, which lent the project a degree of legitimacy and popular appeal. The King’s approval added weight to Chavalit’s strategic plans, effectively making the project a collaborative endeavor that balanced Chavalit’s objectives with the

monarchy's endorsement.

The project also served a secondary purpose in addressing the residual communist influence in the Northeast. After the civil war, the state needed to reintegrate former communists and stabilize areas previously sympathetic to the CPT. Chavalit recognized that sustainable peace required providing ex-communists with land and livelihood opportunities. Degraded forest areas, managed by the Royal Forest Department (originally under the MoAC and later transferred to the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment in 2004), were designated as sites for new rubber plantations. Although unsuitable for rice farming, these areas were well-suited for rubber cultivation, offering an economically viable solution for former communists with limited access to land.

Furthermore, Chavalit's strategic investment in the Northeast aligned with Thailand's shift toward electoral politics. Recognizing the growing importance of voter support in a post-Prem era, Chavalit worked to establish strong networks with the rural populace. The Northeast, which holds the largest share of seats in parliament, represented a critical political stronghold. By aligning the Green Isan Project with local interests and enhancing agricultural productivity, Chavalit aimed to secure a loyal voter base in the region. The project thus marked a transition in Thai politics, as the Northeast began to emerge as a central force, with the dynamics of power gradually shifting from elite control to broader mass politics.

In summary, the Green Isan Project was not merely an economic or agricultural development effort but also a politically charged initiative. Through his strategic alignment with royal endorsement and a focus on rural development, Chavalit leveraged the project to strengthen his political foothold in the Northeast. By positioning the state as both a provider of resources and a mediator of royal benevolence, the project exemplified the complex interplay of monarchy, military, and provincial politics in Thailand's late 20th-century development landscape.

### *Rubber in Electoral Politics*

After the second phase of the Green Isan Project concluded in 2001, Thaksin Shinawatra's cabinet launched a new round of rubber promotion, known as the One-Million Rai Project, on May 26, 2004. This phase aimed to expand rubber cultivation by 700,000 rai in the Northeast and 300,000 rai in the North. The government mobilized agencies such as MoAC, ORRAF, and the Bank of Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives, providing farmers with 5,360 baht per rai in the first year, as well as training, marketing guidance, and access to agricultural loans. Following this promotion effort, central rubber markets were established in the Northeast—in Nong Khai in 2008 and Buriram in 2011. Until then, all of the country's central rubber markets had been located exclusively in the South.

Unlike the Green Isan Project, which operated under military influence, this new initiative was led by the elected government. The 1997 constitution had strengthened executive power, allowing the Thai Rak Thai Party to steer policy-making. This reform redefined the role of bureaucratic bodies, particularly the MoAC, as the cabinet took on greater leadership in rubber promotion. This shift from semi-bureaucratic to democratic governance enabled elected officials to reallocate resources from the South to the Northeast, transferring influence from bureaucrats to politicians. Consequently, rubber promotion became a strategic tool for building political networks, reshaping grassroots politics, and consolidating power.

The decision-making process for rubber promotion reveals its deep entanglement with electoral politics. Analyzing the agencies responsible for introducing rubber-related agendas in cabinet meetings provides insight into the distribution of authority in initiating government programs. From 1959 through the 1980s, the MoAC primarily led rubber-related agendas, with some input from the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB) and limited involvement from international organizations. A review of cabinet meeting records from 1991 to 2004 indicates that, throughout the 1990s, the MoAC continued as the main agency proposing rubber initiatives, with only occasional items introduced directly by the cabinet. From 2001 to 2004, however, all rubber-related agenda items were presented directly by the cabinet, led either by the prime minister or specific cabinet members (Sophon *et al.* 2014, 3–60), reflecting a shift in decision-making authority.

As rubber became central to the formation and maintenance of political networks, rubber-related politics intensified, driving significant political shifts. A prominent example is the 2003 rubber seedling scandal involving Newin Chidchob, who was then serving as Deputy Minister of the MoAC. Newin initiated a program to provide 90 million free rubber seedlings to support farmers. Marking its entrance into the rubber sector, Charoen Pokphand (CP) Group, the country's largest agricultural conglomerate, was granted exclusive rights to supply the seedlings, a contract worth a total of 1.44 billion baht.

The State Audit Office (SAO) began investigating the deal for foul play in 2005; however, the case only gained momentum after the September 2006 coup. The Assets Examination Committee (AEC), established by the coup leaders, advanced the case, identifying 44 individuals implicated in the corruption to stand trial before the Supreme Court's Criminal Division for Holders of Political Positions (Thai Political Facts Info 2009). With mounting legal and political pressure, Newin was seen as having sufficient motivation to change his political stance. Amid post-coup political tensions, he led members of parliament under his influence to defect from the Thai Rak Thai Party and form a coalition with the Democrat Party, enabling them to establish a government with Abhisit



Vejjajiva as prime minister in late 2008.

With Newin as part of Abhisit's coalition government, the Supreme Court's Criminal Division for Holders of Political Positions dismissed all charges against him and the other defendants in September 2009. This case illustrates how rubber became a catalyst for a temporary realignment of parliamentary power, weakening the Thai Rak Thai Party's influence and paving the way for a conservative political trajectory in the years that followed. Rubber was now at the heart of electoral politics in Thailand.

### **Provincial Pioneers: Key Players and Strategies in Rubber Expansion**

Following the launch of the One-Million Rai Project in 2004, three key actors at the provincial level contributed to the promotion of rubber plantations in the Northeast. The two MPs and one researcher/activist respectively used business, bureaucratic, and civil society networks to expand the rubber industry in the region.

#### *The Case of MP Phinij Jarusombat*

Phinij Jarusombat, born in Thailand's central region, entered the political arena in 1992, securing a seat as an MP for the Samakkhi Tham Party in Nong Khai Province. He later co-founded the Seri Tham Party, serving as its leader from 1996 to 2000, before joining the Thai Rak Thai Party, where he became a central figure within the Wang Phayanak faction, alongside Preecha Laohapongchana and approximately 40 other members (Matichon Online 2012). Phinij held key positions in Thai Rak Thai, including deputy leader, deputy prime minister, and minister of a few prominent ministries.

As an MP for Nong Khai, Phinij championed land reform, advocating for the issuance of Sor Por Kor 4-01 (ส.ป.ก. 4-01) land rights documents, which were special land deeds designated for poor farmers under the 1975 Land Reform for Agriculture Bill, and lobbying for greater distribution of rubber seedlings to local farmers. He noted that the Office of the Rubber Replanting Aid Fund (ORRAF) had requested his support in encouraging Nong Khai's farmers to adopt rubber tree cultivation, drawing upon his own experiences to persuade them (Matichon Online 2011). At that time, in 1996, fewer than 40 rubber plantations existed in Nong Khai, each covering only 5–7 rai. Yet Phinij's campaign soon gained momentum, leading to a notable expansion of rubber cultivation across both Nong Khai and Bueng Kan provinces (Sujit 2013).

During the Thai Rak Thai administration, the One-Million Rai Project rapidly expanded rubber plantations in Nong Khai and Bueng Kan, especially while Phinij served as deputy prime minister, leading to an increase in plantation area to over 400,000 rai.



Rising demand for rubber in China further elevated prices, making rubber cultivation more attractive to local farmers. After the Thai Rak Thai Party's dissolution in 2007 and his subsequent five-year political ban, Phinij shifted his focus to local projects, notably promoting rubber exports from Bueng Kan. As president of the Thai-Chinese Cultural Relationship Council (TCCRC), he worked to strengthen trade ties with China, establishing a close partnership with Rubber Valley Group, a prominent Chinese rubber company investing in Thailand's rubber sector (Prachachatturakit 2014). At its peak in 2011, Bueng Kan had 1.4 million rai of land dedicated to rubber plantations (Matichon Online 2011). By promoting rubber plantations, Phinij not only helped develop a large-scale agricultural enterprise but also strengthened his political network by creating economic opportunities for local farmers.

In 2014, the growing number of rubber-smoking factories in Bueng Kan, which produced rubber sheets, provided the province with a competitive economic edge over others in the Northeast, where rubber was typically processed only into rubber cups. Phinij leveraged his ministerial position to forge business partnerships that fueled Bueng Kan's rubber industry growth. Initial investors included Sirithat Rojanaphruk (Com-Link Co., Ltd.) and Theppharak Luengsuwan (Namyong Terminal Public Company Limited), each overseeing 3,000–4,000 rai of rubber plantations. Later, major corporations like Thai Beverage Group's TCC Agro-Industrial, led by Charoen Siriwattthanphakdi—Thailand's largest landowner—entered the market, establishing extensive plantations beginning with 6,000 rai in Pak Khad District and 4,000 rai in Seka District (Matichon Online 2011).

Phinij also obtained high-yield RRIM 3001 seedlings from Malaysia through Sri Trang Industry Co., Ltd., which could produce up to 512 kilograms of latex per rai annually within four years. CP Group's Dhanin Chearavanont further contributed 20,000 JVP80 seedlings, known for rapid growth and high productivity, yielding up to 500 kilograms of latex per rai (Matichon Online 2011).

Through these initiatives, Phinij transformed Bueng Kan into the Northeast's largest rubber-producing province. Although his network held informal control over some land holdings in exchange for a share of farmers' income, the policies generated considerable economic gains for locals, bolstering Phinij's popularity. His case exemplifies a transformative period in Thai politics since the 1997 constitution (often associated with the Thaksin regime), where the relationship between politicians and voters began to hinge on delivering concrete, impactful policies. Phinij's rubber promotion policy, in particular, solidified his political base, representing a pivotal shift as constituents began to see direct benefits from electoral politics.

Conversely, this era also saw politicians leveraging their positions for personal gain.

Phinij's case demonstrates how a politician could use their role to build business alliances and attract investments without damaging their public image. Voters began to accept that politicians might not be entirely free from personal benefits, as long as their actions contributed to economic growth.

### *The Case of Supachai Phosu*

Locally known as *Khru Kaeo* (Teacher Kaeo), Supachai Phosu previously served as the principal of Ban Tha Nham Kaew (ท่าหนามแก้ว) School in Nakhon Phanom Province. His political career began in 2001 when he was elected as an MP for the Thai Rak Thai Party in Nakhon Phanom, aligning with the influential Wang Nam Yom faction led by Somsak Thepsuthin and Suriya Jungrungreangkit (*Matichon* 2006, 11). Following the dissolution of the Thai Rak Thai Party, Supachai stayed committed to its legacy, continuing his political career with its successor, the People's Power Party. In 2008, the Constitutional Court ordered the dissolution of the People's Power Party, resulting in the downfall of Somchai Wongsawat's cabinet. Supachai then aligned himself with Newin's Bhumjaithai Party and supported the opposition Democratic Party in forming a new government in December 2008. From May 2009 to August 2011, he served as Minister of the MoAC.

The political climate during this period was unstable, leading to unpredictable cabinet longevity. In response, Abhisit's government launched the "*Thai Khem Khaeng*" (Strong Thailand) program, focusing on rapid infrastructure development through national budget allocation. As Minister of the MoAC, Supachai promoted rubber in the Northeast and oversaw several critical construction projects. The MoAC established three major STR 20<sup>3)</sup> rubber manufacturing plants in Sisaket, Ubon Ratchathani, and Nakhon Phanom, each capable of producing 20,000 tons of rubber per year. Additionally, to reduce price manipulation by middlemen, the Ministry built rubber and farm input purchasing centers in six provinces across the North and Northeast, in Phayao, Phitsanulok, Kamphaeng Phet, Chaiyaphum, Loei, and Nakhon Phanom (Prachachatthurakit 2011, 8). Supachai noted that manufacturers in Nakhon Phanom processed rubber sourced from 600,000 rai across the provinces of Nakhon Phanom, Mukdahan, Nong Khai, and Sakon Nakhon. The second factory in Udon Thani processed rubber from Loei, Nong Bua Lam Phu, Khon Kaen, Kalasin, and parts of Sakon Nakhon, while the third factory in Sisaket processed rubber from Sisaket, Ubon Ratchathani, Surin, Yasothon, and Amnat Charoen, covering over 500,000 rai in total. From 2011 to 2013, the MoAC under Supachai's leadership

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3) STR 20 stands for Standard Thai Rubber 20, a type of rubber bale primarily made from field coagula mixed with crepe rubber, cup lump, or ribbed smoked sheet. Its specific parameters include: soil content not exceeding 0.16% on a 44-micron aperture, an initial plasticity ( $P_0$ ) of 30, and a plasticity retention index (PRI) of 40.

expanded rubber cultivation by promoting 800,000 rai of new land—500,000 in the Northeast, 15,000 in the North, and 150,000 across the Central, East, and South regions (Supachai Phosu, June 16, 2017, personal communication).

In 2011, Nakhon Phanom celebrated the opening of the Third Thai–Lao Friendship Bridge, linking to Thakhaek District in Khammouane Province, Laos. Supachai seized this opportunity to position Nakhon Phanom as the rubber industry hub of the Indochina region. He expressed his intent to attract more investors to the rubber processing industry, anticipating increased rubber imports from Laos and Vietnam, which would be exported from Nakhon Phanom (Komchadluek 2010).

Leveraging his teaching background, Supachai initiated a pilot project with the Ministry of Education (MoE) to promote rubber planting in northeastern schools. Schools were encouraged to allocate 1–5 rai for plantations, and the ORRAF trained teachers and students to create demonstration plots. This initiative enabled students to learn about rubber cultivation from a young age, resulting in the participation of 40 schools in Nakhon Phanom by 2010, although other provinces showed limited enthusiasm.

Supachai also aimed to establish technical colleges focused on rubber production and processing to cultivate a skilled workforce, enhancing Thailand’s rubber industry and contributing to poverty alleviation among farmers (*Matichon* 2010, 16). However, the project remained unfinished as Supachai’s political term came to an end.

Similar to the first case study, Supachai’s experience illustrates how rubber promotion policies began to serve as vital tools for politicians, particularly during Abhisit’s government, which struggled to secure seats in the Northeast. In 2007, Nakhon Phanom Province recorded the highest rate of “Vote No” in the referendum on the military government’s draft constitution alongside significant opposition from Red Shirts supporters of Abhisit’s government. Consequently, the rubber policy not only promoted Nakhon Phanom Province, but also bolstered Supachai’s political popularity.

While both MPs featured here leveraged networks to promote rubber initiatives, their strategies differed. Phinij relied on his former ministerial business connections, whereas Supachai utilized his bureaucratic ties within the MoAC and the MoE. His approach was notably bureaucratic, favoring ORRAF and leading educational institutions over local government collaborations.

The political landscape after the 2006 coup d’état was marked by a pronounced shift towards re-centralization, a trend that intensified following the 2014 coup. The regime consolidated power through provincial administration reforms, revising regulations to enhance central bureaucratic authority and exert tighter control over local governance (Viengrat 2019). The 2014 coup further eroded local democracy by suspending all local elections until 2019. Under the post-coup authoritarian regimes, bureaucratic power

overshadowed that of elected politicians, resulting in a governance model characterized by bureaucratic inefficiency, which ultimately hindered Supachai's political aspirations.

### *The Case of Prasit Kanchana*

Prasit Kanchana, an adviser to the Association of Rubber Plantation Fund Cooperatives in Ubon Ratchathani, exemplifies effective leadership in promoting rubber plantations in Northeast Thailand. He successfully established a civil society network that connects the civil and political sectors, positioning the association as the most influential farmers' group in the region and serving as a model for others.

Born into a rubber farming family in the southern province of Nakhon Si Thammarat, Prasit's upbringing in a region where rubber cultivation was prevalent inspired his academic pursuit of rubber research. He became a prominent expert in the field while working at the Office of Experimental Field and Central Laboratory within the Faculty of Agriculture at Ubon Ratchathani University.

Prasit's contributions to the rubber industry can be divided into two main areas: lobbying and network building. Through interviews, lectures, and public addresses, he sought to draw government attention to the needs of smallholder farmers. In 2012, official estimates indicated that Thailand had approximately one million smallholder rubber farmers, affecting around six million people. While most of these farmers received support from the ORRAF, which helped mitigate cost-benefit issues, market access remained a significant challenge. To address this, Prasit advocated for legislation promoting domestic rubber consumption, such as permitting the use of rubber in road construction. He also encouraged northeastern farmers to plant rubber alongside other crops to mitigate the risks associated with price volatility.

In addition to his advocacy, Prasit concentrated on building farmer networks to enhance bargaining power and ensure long-term sustainability. By collaborating with academics, social activists, and NGO practitioners, he organized dispersed farmers into cohesive groups, thereby strengthening their negotiating position.

In 2005, Prasit founded the Phu Foi Lom farmer group in Buntharik District, Ubon Ratchathani Province, specifically targeting an area where rubber cultivation had been nonexistent. He mobilized local farmers who wanted to cultivate rubber by enlisting the help of village chiefs, employing a strategy similar to that of NGOs. Through group discussions, farmers identified the sale of their products as a primary concern, leading them to pool resources for transporting their rubber to distant cooperatives. Over time, it became evident that the prices offered by these cooperatives were inconsistent. To address this challenge, Prasit introduced the "Paper Rubber Market," a system that facilitated instant grading and weighing of rubber at collection centers. This innovative

approach enabled online bidding, allowing farmers to collect their rubber and send it to the buying center of the successful bidder. As a result, the farmer group and others evolved into community enterprises and cooperatives.

In 2011, with the opening of the Buriram Central Rubber Market by the ORRAF, the Phu Foi Lom community enterprise merged its Buntharik District rubber collection center with the new facility, establishing a standardized pricing system. By utilizing ORRAF's infrastructure, farmers gained earlier access to reserve funds, which significantly enhanced their operational capabilities.

The success of this initiative attracted additional small-scale farmers, transforming the rubber collection center into the central market for farmers from neighboring provinces, including Sisaket, Amnat Charoen, and Yasothon. During 2011 and 2012, amid declining rubber prices under Yingluck Shinawatra's administration, farmers from southern Thailand protested, while their northeastern counterparts remained uninvolved, largely due to differing political affiliations and a lesser impact from the price drop (Prasit Kanchana, November 8, 2015, personal communication).

By 2011, the Phu Foi Lom farmer group had registered as the "Phu Foi Lom Rubber Community Enterprise," boasting over 3,000 members. In 2012, it transitioned to the "Phu Foi Lom Land Reform Area's Rubber Fund Cooperative Ltd." to achieve legal entity status for conducting business effectively. Ultimately, it formed partnerships with seven other rubber fund cooperatives, leading to the establishment of the Association of Ubon Ratchathani Funding Cooperatives Limited in 2014, which managed all aspects of rubber transactions, including purchasing, processing, and exporting to China (Chitawan 2018, 47). The cooperative association subsequently signed an MOU with a Chinese company to export a minimum of 20,000 tons of rubber bales annually (Prasit Kanchana, November 8, 2015, personal communication).

Prasit's case exemplifies the successful establishment of smallholder farmer networks to enhance the bargaining power of individual farmers in the market. Two key factors contributed to this success. First, Ubon Ratchathani lacked politicians or capitalists who owned large rubber plantations and manipulated rubber promotion for their own interests. While politicians may gain popularity through projects like processing factories or central rubber markets, these initiatives often fail to empower farmers and may benefit politicians or large plantation owners instead. In contrast, local politicians' disinterest in promoting rubber cultivation has allowed leaders like Prasit to form networks of smallholder farmers. Second, Prasit's passion for demonstrating the viability of rubber cultivation in the Northeast has been crucial. He has effectively leveraged his knowledge, skills, and connections within both government and civil sectors to establish robust networks for farmers.

## From State Policy to Practice: Grassroots Transformation

This section examines grassroots village life and the ways in which state policy has influenced and transformed it across different political regimes. The villages discussed are part of the Thai Nation Development Cooperator (TNDC) program, which was initiated by the Thai government for former communists who surrendered their arms and signed contracts to regain their Thai citizenship. These individuals pledged allegiance to the national ideology of “Nation, Religion, and Monarch,” as established by Cabinet Order No. 66/2523 (1980) under Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda.

### *The Case of an Ex-Communist Village*

The first TNDC group was established in Northeast Thailand and comprised four villages with a total of 403 households and 806 residents across the provinces of Mukdahan, Nakhon Phanom, and Yasothon. The residents were former members of the CPT who had worked with the northeastern headquarters located in the Phu Phan mountains range, which connects these provinces. A notable example is the TNDC village Moo 7 in Tambon Um Mao, That Phanom District, Nakhon Phanom, which underwent significant transformation due to the introduction of rubber plantations.

Moo 7 consisted of 80 dwellings, with each family allocated 15 rai for cultivation and half a rai (800 square meters) for living space. The layout of the community was planned by the Royal Thai Army and included essential facilities such as a Buddhist temple and a school. Despite having designated agricultural areas, the land used for the community was repurposed from degraded highland forest and was unsuitable for rice farming. This limitation forced villagers to rely on alternative crops, such as cassava, sugarcane, and eucalyptus, to sustain their livelihoods, presenting a significant challenge.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the village received ongoing support from government projects focused on water resource development, job promotion, and various initiatives framed in discursive terms. Notable campaigns included “Doing Thankless Jobs” (*Pid Thong Lang Phra* ปิดทองหลังพระ), reflecting the values of humility and altruism, and “Edible Fences” (*Rua Kin Dai* รั้วกินได้), promoting the planting of edible climbing plants. These projects aimed to enhance national security and were presented alongside state-sponsored ideologies emphasizing the military, security, and Buddhism (Khemphon Chuetamhun and Summit Chaukumchang; January 10, 2016, personal communication). Although funded by the state, villagers often expressed gratitude towards the military, officials, and royal family members who visited them. Funding for these campaigns typically lasted only for the first one to three years, yet large banners reminding villagers of the state’s support remained prominently displayed. Consequently, the state’s role in

development was frequently perceived as one of benevolence rather than a fundamental duty owed to them by the government. This was reflected in conversations with villagers in which terms like “help,” “mercifulness,” and “kindness” were used when referring to government development projects without mention of their rights to receive services from the government. In contrast, when discussing projects initiated by political parties, they frequently referred to their rights as voters who had made a choice.

In contrast, the rubber promotion initiative introduced in 1998 marked a significant change. Under this campaign, 20 farmer households received support from the ORRAF to cultivate rubber in the form of a specified maximum of 14 rai per farmer. The assistance included the provision of seedlings, land preparation, and a seven-year maintenance fund of approximately 70,000 baht per farmer (Khemphon Chuetamhun, January 10, 2016, personal communication). Farmers who began planting rubber in 1998 were expected to harvest their crops in 2004, once the trees reached a height of 150 cm and a circumference of at least 50 cm, as designated by ORRAF. Following ORRAF’s instructions, farmers transformed rubber into latex sheets and sold them from 2004 to 2010. Over time, they discovered that selling processed products as cup lump allowed for more efficient harvesting, leading to widespread adoption of this method among smallholder farmers in the Northeast.

Farmers acknowledged that Chavalit Yongchaiyudh played a crucial role in initiating rubber promotion projects and establishing connections with the army that aided village development. This gratitude influenced their willingness to vote for Chavalit or his endorsed candidates (Sumit Chuakumchang, January 10, 2016, personal communication). Pajjit Sriworakhan, a prominent Nakhon Phanom politician, commented on this, saying, “The people’s admiration for both army generals and socialist politicians is surprising, but it reflects the influence of both left- and right-wing forces on grassroots communities” (Pajjit Sriworakhan, May 8, 2015, personal communication).

The first rubber harvest in 2004 marked a turning point for the village. From 2004 to 2010, rubber prices remained relatively high and stable (at 60 to 120 baht per latex sheet), compared to other crops, which produced lower returns and were harvested annually. This economic shift enabled villagers to purchase new cars, renovate homes, and send their children to college, significantly improving their material standard of living. Consequently, they recognized the impact of government programs on their lives, which fostered political awareness and engagement with various candidates who could influence their circumstances.

### *The Case of Ban Kaeng Subdistrict*

Ban Kaeng Subdistrict of Na Kae District, Nakorn Phanom is another example that illus-



trates how rubber cultivation spurred political awareness and understanding of market mechanisms among farmers. Located on the outskirts of the Phu Phan Mountains, where the CPT headquarters once operated, most residents were former party members. Prior to being encouraged to plant rubber trees, villagers primarily cultivated rice and other short-term crops, such as bananas, cassava, and sugarcane.

The “Rubber Farmers of Ban Kaeng” group formed in 1993 with 16 members cultivating no more than 200 rai in total. They received financial support from ORRAF for three years to establish rubber plantations and began harvesting in 1999 or 2000. Initially, one kilogram of latex sold for 23 baht. In 1998, during the second phase of the Green Isan project, plantation areas expanded, and the One-Million Rai project under Thaksin further increased cultivation from 2004 to 2006. By 2015, over 4,000 rai of rubber plantations were planted in Ban Kaeng Subdistrict.

The farmer group later established the Ban Kaeng Community for Rubber Enterprise, which comprised 71 members, with the subdistrict headman (กำนัน), who owned the largest rubber plantation area (60 rai), serving as its first president. Those with larger plots often hired fellow villagers to harvest rubber, sharing profits equally from both capital and benefits (Pairoj Pimkhan, January 9, 2016, personal communication).

The enterprise sold its produce in cup lumps through an auction system, with farmers bringing their products to a central market in Ban Kaeng. Approximately ten middlemen from Nakorn Phanom, Sakon Nakorn, and Mukdahan visited the market every ten days to bid on rubber. Farmers determined their bids based on the median price established by the enterprise committee, which they had researched online. These middlemen subsequently sold the rubber to factories in Mukdahan Province, where Rubberland Products Co., Ltd. was the primary purchaser. Farmers needed to stay informed about current events and politics, as political stability directly influenced policy continuity. Leaders within the enterprise committee used smartphones to track rubber prices online and exchanged political news via the LINE social network application (Prasit Sangsri, January 9, 2016, personal communication).

The highest rubber prices in this subdistrict reached 180 baht per kilogram for latex sheets and 77 baht for cup lumps in 2011 and 2012. Farmers invested their earnings in education for their children, cars, and equipment, and they largely supported the Thai Rak Thai Party due to its rubber promotion policies.

By 2015, however, rubber prices had declined, with latex sheets selling for 30 baht per kilogram and cup lumps for 12 baht. This decline has prompted many farmers to diversify their occupations, reducing the significance of rubber production compared to their counterparts in the South, who typically do not own land and face different challenges (Plaeng Wongpreecha, January 9, 2016, personal communication).

All examples studied here illustrate the complex interactions between the state and citizens, with participation from the military, royal institution, bureaucratic officials, national politicians, and local government organizations. The nature of these relationships has evolved significantly since rubber was first introduced in 1987.

Meanwhile, rubber promotion has reshaped local life in two fundamental ways. First, it has shifted the state's role from a welfare provider to a livelihood developer, elevating public expectations that government policies will improve quality of life. Second, it has enhanced farmers' financial conditions, leading to improved commodities, facilities, political awareness, and economic understanding. This newfound political sensitivity empowers farmers to engage in the political process and demand accountability from their leaders, thus fostering democratic values.

## Conclusion

The trajectory of rubber plantations in Thailand's Northeast reflects the country's political evolution. Promotion of rubber cultivation has become a critical policy intertwined with electoral politics, each reinforcing the other during the transition from military to civilian governance, making majority votes essential. To consolidate power, political leaders redirected resources from the South to the Northeast, where the population was larger. Over time, the development and execution of rubber promotion policies mirrored the changing dynamics among the military, bureaucracy, and political elite. After the 2006 coup d'état, these policies were weaponized for political maneuvering, becoming deeply embedded in the electoral process.

The leaders behind rubber promotion campaigns built connections to facilitate the expansion of plantations. During the electoral system's golden age, politicians leveraged these policies to strengthen ties with the business sector, securing benefits that bolstered their political influence. Local administrative networks played a crucial role in this promotion, and post-2006, the focus shifted from local political networks to bureaucratic ones, altering the landscape of rubber cultivation.

Furthermore, the case studies illuminate the vital roles played by civil society, showcasing instances where non-political actors successfully mobilized resources to establish civic organizations, with Ubon Ratchathani serving as a model for sustainable development. At the village level, these communities became political arenas where various actors competed for power. The military supported villagers to maintain social order, while established institutions exploited rural communities to showcase their benevolence. To secure re-election, both national and local politicians introduced programs aimed at

societal and economic transformation. The electoral push to implement these programs, alongside rubber promotion policies, effectively achieved their objectives.

While rubber prices fluctuate with global markets, this study underscores that the well-being of local communities hinges on effective government policies and their implementation. Ultimately, these outcomes empower the people and strengthen the foundations of democracy.

Accepted: September 15, 2024

## Acknowledgments

The author gratefully acknowledges Wataru Fujita for initiating and partially supporting this research through the Sumitomo Foundation. Special thanks are also extended to friends at Nakhon Phanom University, particularly Jarukanya Udanont and Sorat Praweenwongwuthi, the Wongsawangpanich family in Ubon Ratchathani, and research assistants Phuangphan Phukham and Kesinee Jirawanidchakorn. The final stages of this research were funded by the Thailand Science Research and Innovation Fund, Chulalongkorn University (SOC66240005).

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