

SHORT REPORT 1

Election Campaigns and Food Security in Phitsanulok Province, Thailand

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The Thai population, along with government and other services, are all heavily concentrated in Bangkok and its surroundings. The author lives in Phitsanulok province, which is located in the lower north of Thailand, where the primary industry is agriculture. In January 2023, the progressive Move Forward Party, which won the 2023 general election as the dominant party, appealed to young people about the issue of inequality in a speech in Phitsanulok province ahead of the election. The author observed the campaign as a member of the audience. The former party leader, Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit stated that the national average monthly income per capita is 7,500 baht (approximately 34,000 yen, calculated at 1 baht = 4.54 yen as of February 2025), and if Thai people earn 45,000 baht a month, they feel wealthy. The monthly income distribution peaks between 1,700 baht and 66,000 baht. A small number of dominant people have an income exceeding the 66,000-baht income stratum. The average monthly income per capita in Phitsanulok is 9,000 baht. When Thanathorn asked the audience if there were jobs in Phitsanulok, high school students answered, “No.” Thanathorn stressed that there are not many private companies in Phitsanulok that pay a monthly salary of 25,000 baht or more, and it is difficult to get a job at such a company. The Move Forward Party only pointed out the problem and did not offer any concrete measures as a way to tackle it. The disparity in monthly income was a concrete example of an important social problem and a reason to appeal for the need of democracy and decentralization.



FIG. Rpt 1.1 The fertile rice field near the Nan River in Phitsanulok

Source: Photo taken by the author in September 2024

As a result of the general election in May 2023, the second largest party, Pheu Thai, formed a coalition government. During the election campaign the author observed, the current Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra visited Phitsanulok province and emphasized that she would triple farmers’

incomes within four years to make farmers rich if the Pheu Thai Party were to form a single-party government. To this end, her political party, the Pheu Thai, touted that it would increase productivity by measures against drought and flooding with irrigation channels and reservoirs, promote exports of agricultural products to Laos, Vietnam, China, and Europe to expand markets, and raise crop prices. The Pheu Thai Party stated in the election campaign that 40% of the population is employed in agriculture, but this accounts for only 8% of the GDP. Farmers earn only 1,000 baht per rai (0.16 hectares) of rice field. This is not enough for farmers to be able to live. Half of farmers' debts are due to falling crop prices, the Pheu Thai Party said in the rally. The Pheu Thai Party campaigned on breaking the vicious cycle of low production prices and debt. Paetongtarn also stressed that she would create employment opportunities and encourage farmers to move away from agriculture. A by-election for a lower house seat was held in the 1st district of Phitsanulok province on 15 September 2024. The elected Pheu Thai Party lawmaker, who defeated the progressive People's Party (the succeeding party of the dissolved Move Forward Party), pledged to raise agricultural product prices and defer farmers' debt repayments during the election campaign. There was no mention of tripling farmers' incomes (The author observed the election campaign). The reason could perhaps be that the Pheu Thai Party could not form a single-party government and did not secure the position of Minister for Agriculture and Cooperatives in the coalition government.



FIG. Rpt 1.2 The Nan River sent abundant water to the rice fields

Source: Photo taken by the author in September 2024

In the election of August 2024 for the Phitsanulok Provincial Administrative Organization president, voters re-elected Monchai Wiwatthanat who pledged to help farmers by holding product fairs and supporting reskilling (*Prachamati* 16 August 2024). Monchai defeated the candidate from the progressive political party who called for investment in agricultural processing plants and the expansion of agricultural water use in her election campaign which the author observed. Providing agricultural support is not easy at the provincial level because decentralization is not yet advanced.

According to the Phitsanulok Provincial Statistical Office, the number of farmer households that own land, including stock farmers, was 51,990, which accounted for 16.7% of total households in Phitsanulok province in 2022. Their average monthly income per household was 22,386 baht, but their average net profit from farming was only 14,482 baht. It was lower than the total average monthly

income per household, 26,225 baht. The number of farmer households including stock farmers, who do not own their land, was 11,868, which accounted for 3.8% of total households, and their average monthly income per household was 31,725 baht, and their average net profit from farming was 24,549 baht. It was higher than the total average. This suggests that many farmers with tractors and other equipment tend to cultivate rice on other people's land as a commercial business. Agriculture is the top industry in this province, and accounted for 23.7% of Phitsanulok's Gross Provincial Product (GPP) in 2022. The agricultural employment population and GPP ratio are balanced in the Phitsanulok province. This might mean that Phitsanulok is a rural province.

According to the local newspaper *Phao Thai* (16 July 2022), farmers in the Bang Rakam district, Phitsanulok province, handed a petition to a member of the House of Representatives asking for relief because the price of crops fell, and the costs of fuel, fertilizer, pesticides, etc. rose, making it unprofitable for farmers and driving them into debt. Fertilizer had been 600 baht for 50 kg, but the price had increased to 1,700 baht for 50 kg. Therefore, they demanded that the cost support be increased from 1,000 baht per rai to 1,500 baht and that harvesting cost support be 1,500 baht per rai. There was a maximum limit of 20 rai for each. When the author checked with the person in charge at the provincial office, he learned that as of February 2025, the cost support remains at 1,000 baht per rai, and there is no support for harvesting costs, but there is support of 1,340 baht per rai for flood-affected rice fields. However, there is a cap on the amount of support as government support is limited.

Government support is critical for the very survival of family farms because agriculture offers low incomes and is unstable. Agricultural products are essential for life, so raising prices will affect people by making food expensive. The market price of agricultural products is unstable due to varying rainfall, production volume, and international prices. The initial costs are high because seed, fertilizer, pesticides, herbicides, tractors, and other machinery are required. It is sometimes necessary to hire labor. Falling rice prices cause investment losses that are greater than income. Therefore, farmers often incur large debts. Agriculture is vulnerable to climate change, with the number of rainy days decreasing. However, the rainfall is heavier when it rains. Rising temperatures and heat waves have made working in the fields even harder. Agriculture is hard physical labor and young people have an aversion to hard physical work and sweating. There is an increasing population movement from the rural areas to the cities, i.e. increasing urbanization. Young people move from rural areas to cities or even Bangkok to receive, what they believe to be a better standard of higher education. After graduation, many do not return to their hometowns but find employment in the cities, as there are few job opportunities in their hometowns. Agriculture is vital, but people do not want poverty, which is a problem in the rural areas.

Amid modernization and economic development, the image of agriculture in the eyes of many young people is that of an outdated industry that is declining and shrinking. The aging of farmers and the lack of successors are inevitable, especially as so many are intent on leaving farming for the brighter lights and opportunities to be found in the cities. When interviewing farmers in Phitsanulok, the author found that agricultural successors have had the experience of helping their parents with farm work as children. Another condition for remaining in the agricultural industry, is that they inherit

farmland that will allow them to work.



**FIG. Rpt 1.3 Rice field after harvesting and before the second farming,
near a Japanese car parts factory in Phitsanulok**

Source: Photo taken by the author in December 2023

The Thai government and agricultural organizations have promoted smart agriculture, provided subsidies and incentives for young people to return to farming, and supported the branding and export of agricultural products (*Matichon* 22 December 2024). Some farmers have diversified into cash crops, organic farming, and smart agriculture, i.e. using advanced technology such as the internet, AI, and drones to enable them to continue traditional farming. In the current situation, the crop price guarantees and income compensation could stop farmers from leaving farming.

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