

# Bangkok Post

[www.bangkokpost.com](http://www.bangkokpost.com)

## BOOK REVIEW

### Anatomy of Thai elections

#### *Why the South votes Democrat again and again*

**CHRIS BAKER**

'The Democrats could send electricity poles to stand as candidates for Parliament and we would still vote for them.'

In December, the Democrat Party swept the polls in the Southern region and got trounced pretty much everywhere else. This is becoming a familiar pattern, repeated four times over the last seven years. Although this book covers an earlier phase of elections and although it focuses on a single province, it is probably the best guide to understanding the evolving world of Thai electoral politics. How can the Democrats lock up the South? Why can't they repeat the trick elsewhere? How are elections won and lost in Thailand today?

**[bangkok apartment - house](#)**

360 degree photo-full detail-layout house apartment listing sale rent  
[www.accomasia.co.th](http://www.accomasia.co.th)

**[Thailand Directory](#)**

Pre-Qualified, Reliable Suppliers. Source Quality Products. Join Now!  
[www.Alibaba.com](http://www.Alibaba.com)

**[The Inn Saladaeng](#)**

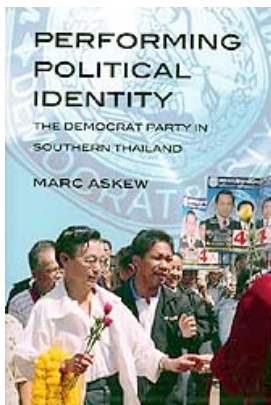
Modern hotel at heart of Bangkok. Start from US\$30. Silom area  
[theinnsaladaeng.com](http://theinnsaladaeng.com)

**[Thai Dental Clinic](#)**

Professional, Specialized Dentists with qualified in-house dental lab  
[www.dentaldesignclinic-lab.com](http://www.dentaldesignclinic-lab.com)

Ads by Google

The book covers a sequence of elections in Songkhla province: A parliamentary by-election in February 2004; the poll for mayor of Hat Yai a week later; the elections for the Provincial Administrative Organisation (PAO) in March and the general election in February 2005.



### **PERFORMING POLITICAL IDENTITY \_ THE DEMOCRAT PARTY IN SOUTHERN THAILAND**

By Marc Askew  
Silkworm Books,  
Chiang Mai, 2008,  
695 baht

Marc Askew spent much of 2005 year attending political rallies, interviewing candidates and party workers, reading local newspapers, picking up gossip in the coffee shops, and generally hanging around the political society of the province.

His narrative accounts of party meetings, election rallies and the hard slog of getting out the vote, manages to convey some of the flavour of the everyday political process. Although the

account also plunges into the minutiae of shifting personal connections and factional rivalries, the intricacy never buries the flow.

Askew shows that electoral politics in Thailand have become very complex and sophisticated. That is not surprising.

Over recent years, there have been a lot of elections at national, provincial, municipal and village levels. The level of interest has been high. It's no good asking whether a party's image, policy slates, personal networks, "influence", or good old-fashioned money is what moves the voter. Askew's point is that all of these have a part to play. To simplify, he arranges the factors into three levels.

First, there is the success of the Democrats in projecting the party as the representative of the South - not just its representative in Parliament, but a representative of "Southern Thai culture". What actually comprises "Southern Thai culture" is not very clear, but Askew stresses that is not the point. People in the South believe they are different, and that the Democrat Party symbolises that difference. The party constantly reinforces this identification through rallies where leaders inveigh against the opponents who are the antithesis of the Southern ideal. In the past, these were dictatorial generals; now they are former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra and business politicians.

This regional identification evolved over a decade and depended crucially on two men. General Prem Tinsulanonda was never a Democrat, but he hailed from Songkhla and the party took its modern form under his premiership. Chuan Leekpai became party leader in the early 1990s and led the Democrats through their most successful decade. Chuan's image as a poor, selfless, small-town lawyer with a reserved manner but great oratorical power has been crucial in shaping the image of the party as a whole. It does not matter that the party has its fair share of gangsters and a dubious record of scandals when in power. Belief matters.

The second component of electoral success is the network of *phuak* or groups of associates. The big figures in political society are those with a wide range of friends and contacts. This is a very practical fact in a society where institutions do not always work as they should and personal contacts are what get things done. Many figures are big because they are rich, but in the South many others have oratorical skills, a record of public service, association with old families, or other assets. In the 1970s, the Democrat Party created a network of branch offices, which give these personal ties an institutional setting and hence extra strength.

But *phuak* politics have an inevitable tendency to split and splinter. Groups which fail to secure the key party candidacies may peel away. In most of the contests covered in the book, the Democrats' opponents were former party members. The Thai Rak Thai recruited these renegades in the hope of undercutting the Democrats' Southern ascendancy.

The third component of elections are the mechanisms for getting the vote out - rallies, leafleting, door-knocks, canvassers, promises and money. The Democrats are expert at the hard-knuckle stuff of local campaigning, especially digging out scandals to haul their opponents down. Although they regularly claim to abhor vote-buying, they do it all the same. Askew traces the vote-buying in one constituency in 2005 in great detail.

The TRT party splashed millions of baht around. The Democrats targeted the floating voters, paid them after the TRT handout and gave them more per head. It seemed to work.

Why then does the South vote Democrat?

Over a period of two decades, the party has built emotional support around the myth that the South is different and that the party represents everything that is best about the region. This emotional bond is constantly reinforced by rallies and other political dramas. Against this emotional backdrop, the party is able to attract and hold the loyalty of big men with extensive networks. With these resources, they can deploy all the effective mechanisms of local campaigning.

In three Songkhla constituencies in 2005, the Democrats fielded a relatively green candidate against a well-entrenched local politician. The opponents stressed their local roots and local records. The Democrats brought in Chuan for a whistle-stop tour. The Democrats won.

Without equivalent studies in other regions, Askew is reluctant to speculate why the Democrats cannot replicate their Southern success elsewhere. Probably their Southern identity has become a handicap elsewhere. Probably the success of the People Power Party and TRT in the Northeast and upper North over the last decade bears many similarities with the Democrats in the South. These regions have developed an emotional bond with their chosen party based on a similar mixture of mythology, *phuak* networks, and electoral chicanery.

At present, this is the most up-to-date, detailed, ambitious and thoughtful book on the rapidly evolving world of Thai electoral politics.