

# Decentralization Discourse in Public Policy of Thailand

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## Abstract

The purpose of this research was three-fold. Firstly, it aimed to examine and critically analyzed the text of the decentralization discourse in the Thai public policy. Secondly, it studied and critically analyzed the practice of such discourse through the implementation of the policy in terms of local administrative regulations. And thirdly, it critically analyzed the result of such discourse that affects local administration and also recommends the approach to resolve the problems stemming from decentralization in local administration. The data were gathered from relevant documents, policies, laws, regulations, and from the interview of experts in local administration and government. Critical discourse analysis was chiefly employed for data analysis. Research results were as follows. First, the text of the decentralization policy in the Constitution, the state administrative policy, and the decentralization law covered the promotion of decentralization that complied with the principle of decentralization and the principle of local administration and government. The text's implication on decentralization comprised of local autonomy, self-government, self-reliance, the will of the people, and mission transfer. Second, the practice of the decentralization discourse in terms of policy implementation in various laws and regulations for local administration according to local administration process was stipulated by the central authority. Third, the resultant local administration had to say that the more such approaches or regulations were adopted for local administration, the less the local autonomy will it become. The acceptance and practice's impact on the erosion of local administrative autonomy took place as a patronage power relation between the central authority and the locality.

**Keywords:** Decentralization Discourse, Decentralization Policy, Local Administration Process, Thailand

## Introduction

Discourse is a process whereby truth about certain things, including social phenomena, is created or defined (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). Decentralization of power to local government is a social phenomenon in democratic societies. Major principles of local government in democratic countries consist of the principle of local government as part of the country, the principle of autonomy, the principle of legal rights, the principle of necessary organizations, and the principle of popular participation. These principles empower the local government organization as the organization of the people, by the people, and for the people, with legal powers and autonomy to administer its own affairs. However, such autonomy of self-government is not sovereignty but an independent power in administration and practice in response to the problems and needs of

people in a locality. Local government organization is a legal entity according to the public law, established with recognition by the law, is independent and separate from governmental organization, has its own budget and its own personnel who are not officers of the central authority, can exercise its judgment to formulate policies or to mitigate problems in their locality independently according to the law, and can undertake its administration smoothly without the domination or interference from the government (Robson, 1966; Ratanasermpong, 2013). Ever since the promulgation of the Kingdom of Thailand's 1997 Constitution, the principle of and the term "decentralization" had emerged and increasingly dominated the formulation of public policy and state administration. The Constitution's many articles called for decentralization through local government as well as independent policy formulation, personnel management, and financial and budgetary management-all of which were under minimal supervision of the central government. The promulgation of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand in 2007 continued to address the importance of decentralization of power to local administration organization.

Apart from the above-mentioned directive principles of fundamental state policy, the promotion of autonomy and supervision of local administration organization were also clearly stated in the chapter that deals with local administration. Section 281 states that according to Section 1 (Thailand is one and indivisible Kingdom), the State shall give autonomy to local administration organization with the principle of self-government according to the will of the local people and shall encourage the local administration organization to be the principal public service provider and to participate in local problem resolutions. Any locality with attributes that meet the condition of self-government has the right to be established as a local government organization as stipulated by the law. Section 282 states that the supervision of local government organization shall be exercised in so far as it is necessary under the rules, procedure, and conditions that are consistent with and suitable for the structure of that local government as provided by law, and must be for the protection of local interests or the interests of the country as a whole, provided that it shall not substantially affect the principle of self-government according to the will of the local people, nor go beyond the provisions of law. For the supervision under paragraph one, there shall be a central standard to be applied to local government organizations, upon their own selection, with regard to the appropriateness and the different levels of development and efficiency in the administration of each type of local government organization, and which does not affect the capability of such organization in decision making to fulfill their requirements. There shall also be a mechanism to check such performance which is carried out mainly by the people. Furthermore, Section 283 states that local government organizations have the powers and duties to maintain and provide public services for the benefit of the local people. They have the autonomy in laying down policies, administration, as well as the provision of public services, staffing, and budgeting; and shall have specific powers and duties in compliance with the development of the provinces and the country as a whole. (Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, 2007)

The Constitution 1997 and 2007 had clear intention to lower the roles of the central authority and the regional authority and to expand the roles and duties of the local administrative organizations but inefficient decentralization in practice. (Na Chiangmai, 2010) The Constitution's articles had led to the formulation of various policies, plans, laws and regulations concerning decentralization to local government organization that are still in effect. However, are these policies, plans, laws and regulations, particularly the Ministry of Interior's regulation concerning the administration and local government truly in compliance with decentralization principle according to the will

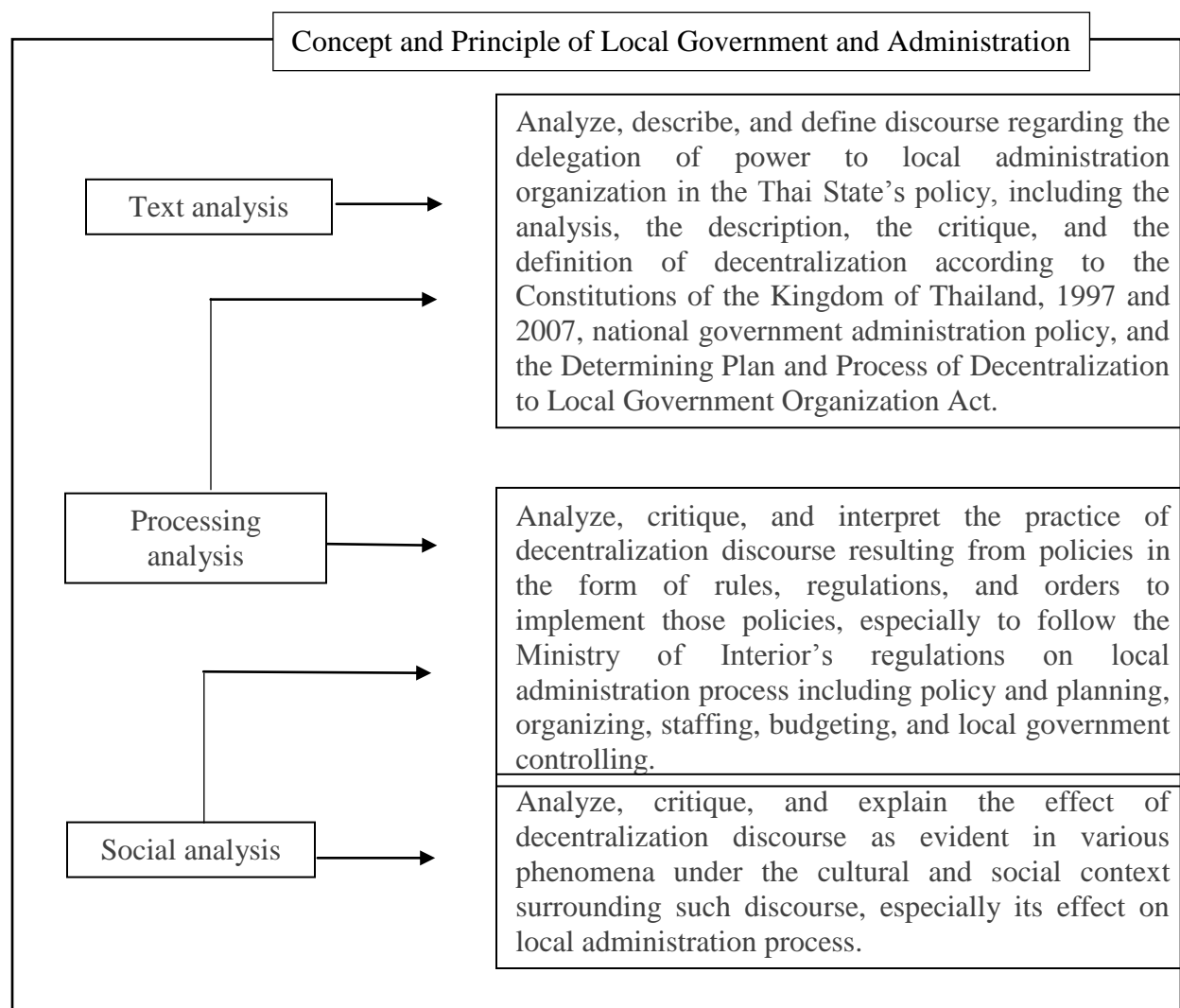
and the articles of the Constitution. Were the administration and performance of local government organizations in Thailand in the past truly autonomous according to the Constitution and decentralization principle? As a discourse, how has decentralization in accordance with the constitution and various rules and regulations been applied to local administration? Was it in compliance with the principles of decentralization and local government administration?

This research has three objectives, as follows. (1) To examine and critically analyzed the text of the decentralization discourse in the Thailand public policy. (2) To studied and critically analyzed the practice of such discourse through the implementation of the policy in terms of local administrative regulations, and (3) To critique the result of decentralization discourse that affects local administration and to put forth the guidelines to resolve the problem of delegation of power to local administration that complies with the principles of decentralization and local government.

### **Literature Reviews and Conceptual Framework**

Concepts, principles, and researches concerning decentralization and local government reviewed for this research are the decentralization concept, local government and local administration principles, decentralization to Thai local government organization, relevant research and academic works, The Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, 1997, The Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, 2007, The Determining Plan and Process of Decentralization to Local Government Organization Act (Decentralization Act), 1999, decentralization policy from the government's declaration of public administration policy to Parliament indicated since 1997-2014, Local Personal Administration Act, 1999 and Ministry of Interior's regulation relevant local administration process.

In this research, a broad conceptual framework has been defined as a guideline for the study and applied from the three-dimensional discourse analysis of Fairclough (1995) and integrated with Robson's (1966) concept of local government administration and the local administration process stemming from the principle of delegating the power and autonomy to local administration organization as stipulated in the Constitution. Local administration must have autonomy in policy and planning, organizing, staffing, and budgeting, under the government's supervision. In carrying out the research, such conceptual framework would be loosely followed, with the analysis, description, interpretation, and explanation of the discourse or phenomenon that has taken place while other important issues regarding decentralization not within such framework will not be neglected. The conceptual framework is as follows.



**Figure 1** Research Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 sets out the conceptual framework that aims to describe the discourse of decentralization with text analysis of the discourse concerning government policy from the Constitutions of the Kingdom of Thailand, 1997 and 2007, particularly the articles regarding decentralization. Other text analysis involves the government's administrative policy on decentralization and the delegation of power to local administration organization. The analysis and description of such discourse follows the line of Robson's (1966) concept and principle of local government specifying that local administration organization is part of the state, with independent power of self-government along with legal rights and necessary organization for autonomy.

In the analysis, the critique, and the interpretation of the processing analysis will involve the application of the administrative process concept that treats decentralization discourse as being transmitted or sent to be implemented through laws and regulations on local government process, including the analysis and interpretation of the creation, the reproduction, and the dissemination of such discourse to the practice in terms of laws and regulations particularly the Ministry of Interior's regulation on various administration and performance in policy and planning,

organizing, staffing, budgeting, and controlling. The analysis as well as the interpretation will be under the framework of the concept and principle of decentralization and local government administration.

Finally, social analysis will cover the analysis, the critique, and the explanation of the effect of decentralization discourse--one of the social phenomena--to illustrate how the socio-cultural context surrounding the decentralization discourse has been dominating local administration organizations and how such practice affects the local administration process.

## **Research Methodology**

Research methodology comprises two major parts. First, the discourse analysis (DA) according to Fairclough (1995) starts with the analysis of the text to discover its meaning, composition, and detail. After that the discourse practice is analyzed and interpreted to establish how such discourse is originated, created, or produced; how does it dominate other discourse or set of ideas; whether such discourse practice follows the implication of the discourse. The next step is to analyze how the sociocultural practice under such discourse causes any phenomenon or impact on the institution and the socio-culture. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) regards language as a social practice that focuses on the role of discourse in the construction and promotion of inequality in power relation (Wodak & Fairclough, 1997). Such approach emphasizes the practice of language and discourse that are related to powers (Phillips and Hardy, 2002). The research issue in CDA is, therefore, related to the abuse of power, inequality, and the injustice that have been produced and communicated through discourse as well as resistance towards such injustice. Nevertheless, CDA aims to arouse awareness in the issues that would lead to the emancipation of those being dominated to be better off (Panphothong, 2013). Thus, when comparing discourse analysis with CDA the analytical process may not digress very much but their emphases are quite different. Critical discourse analysis focuses on the inequitable use of power to bring forth the awareness in the issue that would lead to the emancipation of those being dominated and to affect the change in a better direction. In so doing, the analyst or the researcher must stand with the dominated or the socially abused.

Second, the unit of analysis that comprises various documents on policies, legislations, and regulations that have been formulated and promulgated to promote decentralization or have led to decentralization. They include the Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, 1997 and 2007, the administrative policy declared to Parliament, The Determining Plan and Process of Decentralization to Local Government Organization Act, 1999 and its amendment, legislations to establish local administrative organization and indebt interview twelve experts in decentralization and local administration and government, were selected by purposive sampling according to their generalization in supporting decentralization.. The experts were classified into four groups: the scholars, the politicians, the government officials, and the local administrators. The tools for this research are for the data collection that comprise the document survey form created for the surveying, recording, classifying, and grouping of documents pertaining to decentralization discourse within the Thai public policy; and the form to interview the expert constructed to gather the expert's opinion on the context surrounding decentralization discourse including social phenomenon resulted from such discourse. Analysis of the data in this research is divided into three parts, as follows. (1) The analysis and critique of documentary data involving the discourse text utilized the typology and taxonomy of the data. Content analysis and componential analysis of the decentralization discourse were then undertaken to find out whether such discourse contained words that were the component of the discourse creation or how it

could be communicated in support of decentralization. Finally, the data or the result from this stage would be subject to the analytic induction, discourse analysis, and critical discourse analysis. (2) Discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis were carried out to analyze, critique, and interpret the discourse text that interact with or practiced through policy transformation into laws and regulations for local administration. Cause and effect analysis was undertaken to establish whether the origin of discourse practice complied with or deviated from the principles or the text. (3) Critical discourse analysis was performed on the result of discourse practice that affected local administration so recommendation could be offered. The overall condition of the existing decentralization phenomenon was critically analyzed followed by the suggestion to further develop decentralization in Thailand that would be in compliance with the decentralization principle and the local administrative principles. All of the research methodology mentioned above can be summarized by linking to the research objectives

## Research Results

### Discourse Analysis of Decentralization Text in the Thai Public Policy

Analysis of the text on decentralization from the government's declaration of public administration policy to Parliament indicated since 1997-2014 that most of the governments attempted to promote decentralization and to strengthen local administration organization. But two particular governments did not have a clear-cut decentralization policy; one of which came to power by an election while the other came to power through a coup d'état. Governments with decentralization policy used wordings in their policy that complied with provisions in the Constitution as well as the principle of decentralization and the principle of local government. The policy covered the increase of autonomy to local administration organization in its administration and budgeting, the increase of revenue allocation and budget to a locality, the promotion of responding to and resolving their own problems, the enhancement of self-reliance, the transfer of mission from the central government to local administration organization, and self-government in accordance with the needs or the will of the local people.

Provisions in the 1997 and the 2007 Constitutions of the Kingdom of Thailand clearly state the will to support decentralization so that the Thai people would have autonomy in local administration by specifying the organizing of local administration under the principle that "*the State shall give autonomy to local government organization with the principle of self-government according to the will of the people in a locality*" (Section 282 in 1997 Constitution and Section 281 in 2007 Constitution). The Local Personnel Administration, 1999, and the Determining Plan and Process of Decentralization to Local Government Organization Act of 1999. These laws were formulated in accordance with the approaches set out in the Constitution resulting in changes that were more in line with the principle of decentralization in many aspects, from the changes in the people's power of self-government to the structural changes and the changes in power of local administrative organization. The text of the Determining Plan and Process of Decentralization to Local Government Organization Act aimed to promote decentralization according to the will and the provision of the Constitution that complied to the principle of decentralization and the principle of local administration and government, especially the organization of the public service system that has been the authority of the local government (Krueathep, 2015). Such provision means that local organization has the duty to arrange for more public services to resolve the problem and to respond to the needs according to the will of the local people. Higher allocations of revenues from various taxes and duties to a locality ensures

higher local capability of self-reliance and self-government in accordance with the will of the local people.

Considering the text of decentralization from the promulgation of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand in 1997 and 2007 it was found that “decentralization” is a word that was created and widely reproduced to communicate to the government or the central administration to delegate the power and rights and to transfer the authority and duty along with various resources to organizations in a locality to give them more opportunity and administrative autonomy in accordance with the needs and the problems of each locality. Given the significance of such decentralization according to the provision of the Constitution (Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, 1997 and Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, 2007), the decentralization law (Determining Plans and Process of Decentralization Act, 1999), and the previous government policy on decentralization, it can be argued that the word “decentralization” in the sense of the Thai public policy comprises “local autonomy”, “self-reliance”, “self-government”, “the will of the people”, and “mission transfer”.

### **Discourse Analysis of Decentralization Practice**

The practice of decentralization discourse according to the Thai public policy is apparent in the laws, rules, and regulations that have been specified as the guidelines for local administrative organization to adhere to, particularly the laws and regulations pertaining to local government. When scrutinizing each stage of the local administration process, it was found that the practice of decentralization discourse had diverted from the principle of decentralization, the policy, and the provision in the Constitution in the stipulation of local policy and planning, organizing and staffing, budgeting, and controlling.

On formulating policy and planning of local administrative organization even though the local administrator could formulate the administrative policy and local development plan within their own locality but such formulation still had to adhere very closely to the central and regional policies. For local development planning, the Ministry of Interior’s Regulation on Local Administrative Organization Development Planning 2005, must be followed. The regulation set out the details regarding the types of the plan, the planning committee, the monitoring and evaluating committee, as well as the planning manual for local administrative organization to utilize. (Ministry of Interior’s Regulation on Local Administrative Organization Development Planning, 2005)

Local administrative organization had to adhere to the regulations set out by the central authority for its organizing. Any proposal to establish separate units or divisions within the local administrative organization must be approved by the committee as specified by law passed by the central authority. The Regulation of Personnel Administration Act promulgated in 1999 specified a three-tier central personnel administrative organization. In local staffing, local administrators in each locality handled their staffing under the rules and standards set by the agency or the above-mentioned central committees. There were even attempts to enforce rules, regulations, and standards for other government officials especially those of the civil officers on local officials and employees.

On financial administration, both the state policy and provisions in the Constitution called for the autonomy of local budgeting, self-reliance in local finance, and the enhancement of financial capability of local administrative organization. But in practice, it was found that Thai local administrative organization had the power and duty in budgeting but it did not possess the autonomy specified by the principle of decentralization, the state policy, and provisions in the Constitution, owing to the fact that local revenues, expenses, and budgeting all had to be handled

according to the laws and regulations set by the central authority. The law to establish local administrative organization and the decentralization law had already specified the type and source of their revenue and its allocation for local administrative organization. The taxes and duties that local administrative organizations could collect were local development tax, building and land tax, signboard tax, and animal slaughter tax. All of these taxes had low tax bases and did not generate considerable income for the locality. Although there appeared to be various sources of revenues specified by law that delivered revenues from various taxes and fees but these revenues were collected by other agencies and allocated in the proportion specified by law. Thai local income, thus, did not come from the taxes or fees collected within the locality but was derived from the allocated revenues plus the grant-in-aid from the government. This further illustrates that most of the Thai local administrative organizations do not have the autonomy nor can they be self-reliant because they still have to depend largely upon state subsidy. On many occasions, state subsidy was for a specific purpose that required the locality to spend it in order to implement particular policy, plan, and project set out by the government. Local government, therefore, does not have the autonomy to utilize the subsidy or the grant-in-aid from the central government for its own necessity that differs from locality to locality.

For controlling and examining of the Thai local administration, it was found that such administration was highly related to the central and the regional bureaucracy leading to greater roles of these two organs in the control. The central authority has the power and duty involving local government in many aspects: from the establishment of local administrative organization to the specification of the organization's structure, to the determination of the organization's revenue, to local staffing as well as the performance of local administrative organization that had to conform with law, rules, and regulations specified by the central authority. At the same time, the regional administration especially by the provincial governor and the district officer both had roles, power, and duties in the local government-from legislative to administrative to approving bills as well as supervising legal performance of local administration and asking for persons or documents to be explained or investigated, etc. Moreover, such supervision and examination also covered every stage of the local administrative process-from policy and planning, organizing and staffing, and budgeting.

This is to say that each locality does not have true autonomy in its administration according to the principle of decentralization and the principle of local government, in harmony with the following viewpoints from the experts on problems concerning the practice of decentralization.

"There is only one problem with decentralization. That is, the government has not been decentralizing. To resolve this is to fight with the government. Decentralization is like a war on power struggle to conquer a city, between government and locality. Government is like the mother land governing the colonies" (JAR, 2015)

"Democracy creation is divided into two parts: the upper part of democracy and the lower part of democracy. Decentralization enhances the lower part of democracy that empowers the people in self-government of each locality. But it's obvious that the government and the central authority personnel have been paying very little attention to the enhancement of the lower part of democracy" (UDO, 2014)

"Modern principle of administration is area-based, therefore, the locality has the leading role. In some countries decentralization took place before the State was created. If we use their principle of decentralization as a reference, we can see clearly that decentralization in Thailand is truly lacking. It is obvious that there hasn't been any enhancement of the people's political power. The



government hasn't granted such power. Giving political power to the people would not happen, for sure" (RUE, 2014)

"Decentralization to local government is part of the unitary state. Autonomy must be under the law, based on the delineation of powers and duties-what the State can do, and what the locality can do. All must be done legally. Juristic person must also be provided by the law-what one can do. Actually, the principle of decentralization is in harmony with the principle of administration and local government. It's just that when we talk about decentralization in Thailand, it might not be in accordance with the principle or the theory of decentralization. For instance, we might choose the issue whether giving the power of decentralization is a form of allocation, sharing, or granting such power to a locality. That is, there exists the relationship between state power and local power. I think we don't think about that--setting the relationship between powers in decentralization. We didn't think hard enough about previous decentralization or we didn't think at all. And that does not comply with the principle of decentralization" (KOV, 2014)

"Decentralization in Thailand can be called structural decentralization. Unfortunately the structure is overlapped. In regard to power, it was more of a power sharing or power delegation. Power transfer is still unclear and has not taken into account the potential of an area. Decentralization must aim for self-government by villagers according to preparedness of a locality. Thus, what is in existent does not very much comply with the democratic principle nor the principle of administration and local government" (BON, 2014)

"Decentralization and local structure in Thailand has imitated the government's structure. Its administration is like the central public administration. The existing decentralization has been adjusted to suit each time period, so much so that our localities have adopted the government's form with Thai-styled decentralization. That is, we have the central government with regions as its arms and legs, and the localities in such a state as they have always been" (PAI, 2014)

"The substance of decentralization to a locality has been by the principle because if we observe the decentralization law or the way to maintain the unitary state as has been mentioned, it boils down to granting the autonomy but with limitation. Meaning that they took into account and accepted the existence of local administrative organizations that are juristic persons. Our decentralization took place after the 1997 Constitution. It was a good time to delegate parts of the government's work to the localities, right? But, all along, the attempt was to give parts of the central government's work to them. But if one should ask whether the practice was in accordance with the principle or not, in my personal opinion, it hasn't been so. It couldn't have been so because of the basic thinking of the people to delegate the power in trusting the locality plus the preparedness of the localities themselves that had not been familiar with undertaking difficult task. Therefore, for the past fifteen years, it was mainly the case of achieving common interest-that has not truly promote decentralization at all, either the giver or the taker. The giver did not really want to give whereas the taker did not really want to take" (VEE, 2014)

"Decentralization has not been carried out according to the proper procedures and process. Today decentralization means granting more power to the people. We have the Decentralization Act since 1999 but it has not been properly undertaken. The agency that has slowed down the decentralization is the bureaucratic sector that has not let go of the power. So I would like to inform them that the true decentralization must reach the people's hands. But nowadays decentralization has not been delivered to the people. The work, the money, the personnel have not been transferred simultaneously. Some agencies attempted to avoid decentralization such as the Department of Rapid Rural Development. When it was transferred to the locality, it has changed its name to the Department of Rural Roads. Or the public health center has changed into

the Tambon Health Promotion Hospital. This clearly shows the defrauded decentralization and insincerity. And at the end, the one that has totally obstructed decentralization is the bureaucratic sector” (CHI, 20/02/2015)

The above-mentioned viewpoints from the experts all pointed out that the previous practice to promote decentralization by the government lacked its attention, conviction, and sincerity. The most important problem of decentralization was not to decentralize at all. Decentralization that was undertaken was only to comply with the law more than to grant autonomy to the people so that they could have true self-government. The power structure had not changed because the central government was still centered with the transfer of only some missions, parts of the budget, and some personnel to local administrative organization. Although the local executives hold more power in administration but it was in compliance with the law and regulations that the central administration had previously prescribed, not the autonomy that ought to be according to the decentralization text and the principle of decentralization. Decentralization has certain scope of powers that the government must delineate clearly between the central authority and the locality. There must also be the explicit organization of power relationship between the State and the local administrative organization. However, Thailand still has the problem with this issue. The decentralization law was promulgated without seriously carrying it out, either by the political sector or the bureaucratic sector. Any previous undertaken decentralization was only in structure, not the true decentralization that granted the power of self-government to the people. This was due to the decentralized structure that was overlapped. So far the powers and duties given to local administrative organization was, in reality, the division or delegation of power that the central authority still held and carried out. True decentralization of power to people in a locality would not have been possible without development of democracy that offered people in that locality the opportunity of administration and self-government based on the preparedness and potential of that particular area or locality.

The practice of decentralization already carried out, therefore, did not comply with the principle of decentralization or the principle of local government that should have been despite the fact that the policy or the decentralization text did comply with the principle of decentralization. When analyzing each stage of local government process, it was found that the practice of decentralization discourse had deviated from the principle of decentralization, the policy, as well as the provisions in the constitution regarding the prescription of policy and planning, organization and personnel administration, finance, and controlling of the locality.

The summary of the level of decentralization discourse practice in Thai local administration shown that table 1.

**Table 1** Summary of the level of decentralization discourse practice in Thai local administration

<b>Decentralization Implication</b>	<b>Administrative Process</b>	<b>Policy and Planning</b>	<b>Organizing and Personnel Administration</b>	<b>Budgeting</b>	<b>Controlling</b>
Local autonomy	✕	✕	✕	✕	✕
Self-government	✕	✕	✕	✕	✕
Self-reliance	✕	✕	✕	✕	✕
The will of the people in a locality	△	✕	✕	✕	○
Mission transfer	△	○	○	○	○

✓ = The discourse practice complies with the text and the principle of decentralization.

△ = The discourse practice begins to comply with the principle of decentralization.

○ = The discourse practice complies with the text but not the principle of decentralization.

✕ = The discourse practice does not comply with the text and the principle of decentralization.

Table 1 indicates that the decentralization practice on local administration mostly followed the text but it has not been in compliance with the text and the principle of decentralization. The practice was merely the modification of the policy or the text so that the State was seen to have decentralized according to the text or the principle of decentralization. But the resultant practice has deviated from the text and the principle. The implication or the issue that has progressed more than any other aspects is the mission transfer that has not yet been fully accomplished but the local administrative organizations have managed to deliver various public services prescribed by the law for such transfer. Subsequently, the local administrative organizations can plan, organize, administer their personnel, allocate their budget, and control the operation in accordance with the transferred mission and to assure that such mission is successfully carried out at a certain level. At present, the civil sector in a locality can participate in the planning and controlling according to their will much more than in any other stages of the local administrative process. Such participation is possible because of the prescription or regulation by the law including community participation in planning and participation in the committee to monitor and assess local development plan. Comparison of decentralization implication with local administration procedure in each aspect is as follows.

Local autonomy in policy and planning: although local administrative organization has the powers and duties in policy formulation and local development planning, but the operation still depends on the regulation prescribed by the central administration in the form of clear guidelines with details that could be regarded as a manual of practice for each locality. In organizing and personnel administration, there are central organizations that prescribe the rules and standard much more than necessary leading to organizing and personnel administration that the locality can carry out in a limited way. In financial administration covering local revenues, expenditures, and budgeting there are regulations and detailed guidelines prescribed by the central administration for the locality to follow; revenue sources, expenditure types, and budgeting process have all been determined and controlled by the central regulations. For controlling, the law and regulations attempt to use the word “supervise” but it turns out to be the case of over-supervision by prescribing rules and regulations as well as using the central mechanism-the regional administration-to control the locality with control a priori rather than control a posterior.

**Self-government:** Exercising the executive power to carry out local administrative organization's operation does not terminate at the locality. Other state mechanisms still dominate local administrative organization's decision-making: in policy and planning, organizing and personnel administration, financing, and controlling. Regulations, especially those issued by the Ministry of Interior are regarded as the implementation of the decentralization text or policy, are eroding the administrative power of the locality resulting in their inability to deal with problems arising from local administrative process. The use of administrative power by a locality, as a result, is rather limited in accordance with the regulations set by the central authority.

**Self-reliance:** Local administrative organization has very low level of self-reliance, particularly in financing due to low revenue types the locality can collect as prescribed by financial law and regulations. The more the local administrative organization has to depend on allocated revenues and subsidies from the government, the less self-reliance in financing it will have. Similarly in organizing and personnel administration, laws and regulations prescribed by the central organization has eroded self-reliance of the locality particularly in utilizing local people for the locality. In policy and planning, although the locality can formulate the local development plan in accordance with the will of its people but the implementation must comply with the regulations prescribed by the central authority. In controlling, the law has allowed for local mechanism to have a major controlling role but in practice, local administrative organizations are still controlled and assessed by other state mechanisms more than being controlled by people in their locality.

**The will of people in a locality:** In the local administrative process, people in a locality have a chance to express their will mostly in local policy formulation and planning through petitions to put forth the local law and to organize community meeting to propose the problem and their needs as part of local development plan in accordance with the Ministry of Interior's regulation on local development planning. However, other stages in the local administration process see practices that comply with people's will in a restricted way. Neither the organizing nor the personnel administration have laws or regulations that allow direct people participation. Although there are laws and regulations allowing people participation in the controlling of local administration but the practice is rather restrictive.

**Mission transfer** is regarded as the implication of decentralization in the Thai State policy that has progressive practice more than any other aspects. Such progress results from its concreteness that it has more than in other aspects coupled with the decentralization law that clearly prescribes the guidelines and measures in mission transfer. The text of the decentralization law clearly outlines the mission transfer procedures but in practice its implementation was found to have been only partially successful to be complying with the principle of decentralization. Considering the administrative process, the policy and planning, the organizing and personnel administration, financing, and controlling of local administration are all the mission of local administrative organization. But its practice still has to comply with the rules and regulations prescribed by the central administration. Hence, limited undertaking of local administrative organization's mission according to the administrative process.

The above analysis can be concluded that if the practice of decentralization discourse is considered along the implication of the text and the local administrative procedures, it was found that decentralization to local administrative organizations in Thailand did have limitations. Mostly it did not comply with the text and the principle of decentralization even though the overall decentralization text or the policy are in accordance with the principle of decentralization and the principle of local administration and government. The mechanism or the important factor

that has led to the deviation of the principle is the jealousy of power on the part of the central administration particularly the Ministry of Interior that has powers and key roles in controlling local administrative organization. Regulations of the Ministry of Interior pertaining to local administrative process that have been transformed from the decentralization text or policy that is actually debilitating more than promoting decentralization. Such regulations have guidelines and details that are more than necessary in practice. They are orders that force local administrative organization to strictly comply with them. What makes matters worse is that local administrative organization is willing to comply because it acquiesces with the higher power. This reflects the patronizing power relationship between the central administration and the locality in which the central administration wants to keep its power whereas the locality wants to rely on the central administration more than itself.

Discourse analysis of the Thai public policy in this section can be concluded that the Thai local government did not truly have the autonomy according to the principles of decentralization and local administration. The central and regional authorities have been intervening the work of local administrative organization. The relationship between the central and regional authorities and local administrative organization remains very close. That is to say that the central government and the regional government had determined the approach for local administrative organization's administration and work in many aspects. How much power local administrative organization would have depends upon delegation of power from the central government. The local administrative organization's revenues, their sources, and conditions were controlled and stipulated by the central government's law.

### **Critical Analysis of the Outcome of the Decentralization Discourse in the Thai Public Policy**

The practice of decentralization discourse had affected each stage of the local administration process. In the policy formulation of Thai local administrative organization, the provision of the by-law stipulated that the decision making did not end at the local council but had to be approved by the supervising regional official mechanism. Such stipulation means that the central government does not trust the local government while local development planning must adhere to the regulations set up by the Ministry of Interior. The detailed guidelines for the implementation eroded the local autonomy specified in the principle of decentralization, the principle of local administration and government, and the provisions in the Constitution. Consequently, local administrative organization was unable to determine its own approach and format of policy formulation and planning. Acceptance of strict procedure further weakened local administrative autonomy, policy and plan formulation, as well as their implementation. Several cases were not the results of the problems or the needs of the local people but rather undertaken in compliance with the policy and plan of the central authority, most of which aimed to respond to the general problem and needs of the country. They, therefore, did not comply with the problem and need that differed from locality to locality. Acceptance of the central authority by the locality could have resulted from the lack of knowledge concerning the rights, duties, and autonomous power in local administration itself along with the consent to higher authority as well as the dependence on central authority for administrative resources. Consent to the central authority more than the consideration for local administration on the part of the local administrative organization means that each locality effectively erodes its own autonomy. The consent and agreement to implement the government's policy and plan that do not comply with the problem and the needs of the locality resulted in the loss of development opportunity and resources that are in accord with the problem and the need of the local people.

On organizing of the locality it was found that the arrangement of various work and position in Thai local administrative organization has been well defined in the law enacted by the central authority. Divisions within the local administrative organization must adhere to the law. If the locality wanted more subdivision due to its power, duties, or necessity, it must be carried out through the committee or a mechanism set up by the central authority. That is to say, that it must seek the agreement of approval before hand. Thus, the locality does not have any autonomy in self-organization. The structural organization and the work division in the locality conforming to the law set up by the central authority resulted in the local administrative organization having similar structure to those of any government agency both central and regional organizations. One distinct characteristic of the local administrative organization that differs from other government agency is its administrative autonomy, including organizing, since it is the major task of administration. Such autonomy is recognized by the Constitution and conforms to the principle of local administration whereas the Constitution does not stipulate any autonomy for other government agencies.

On staffing or the local personnel administration, it was found that the central authority or the central staffing organization attempted to create unity and homogeneity in personnel administration. Moreover, it had tried to implement the central authority's personnel administration system in the local administrative organization. There exist three levels of central personnel administrative organization, namely the national level, the middle level, and the primary or the locality level (Local Personal Administration Act, 1999). At the same time other government officials both in the central and the regional sectors have only one central organization handling their personnel administration. Such situation reflects the complexity of local personnel administration that is full of the controlling mechanism more than any other government agencies. The local personnel administration is also under the central system or domination of the central officials, central standard, general standard, as well as the criteria and regulations pertaining to staffing similar to those for civil servants or central officials that have been adapted for local implementation.

On local financial administration, it was found that several financial regulations set up by the central authority had eroded the autonomy of local financial administration and had led to the inability of the local administrative organization for self-reliance. This was due to fact that the local revenue source, type of revenue, proportion of revenue, budgeting, payment, and borrowing of the locality has already been determined by law and the central authority's regulation. Most of the local revenue had to be supported by the government and the central authority resulting in limited self-reliance on the part of the locality. Therefore, most local administrative organization could not be self-reliant in terms of its finance. In spending and local budgeting, the locality still had to adhere to the central regulation in practice. Consequently, local administrative organization had to accept higher authority and had to strictly adhere to the regulations. Hence, the locality had lost its legitimate financial autonomy. However, the locality had not responded by petitioning for such autonomy but had requested more subsidy from the government instead. The more the government had allocated the budget for the locality, the less local autonomy and the increasing reliance on the government.

On controlling of local administration, it was found that local administrative organization in Thailand was under the supervision of many sectors. Such controlling process involved both control a priori and control a posteriori. Supervision by the Ministry of Interior included the enactment of laws and regulations for every stage of the local administration together with the stipulation to subject to the approval and permission from the supervising agency especially the

provincial governor or the district officer which can be regarded as the control or supervision a priori. This type of control clearly demonstrates over-supervision of local administrative organization that is not based on local autonomy. The controlling stemming from the central and the regional authorities especially the control a priori had apparently eroded local administration. Such over-controlling had affected the local administration particularly in its creation of innovation and the initiation of new work according to local power and duties.

The impact of decentralization discourse practice on local people and community was both positive and negative. Considering the overall administrative process, the decentralization process to local administrative organization in Thailand tends to increase autonomy of local administrative organization. But in practice, it is rather domineering in the form of paternalism rather than a partnership in national development. That is, the government and the central authority are like the father or a guardian who outlines the framework and commands local administrative organization that is like the child to follow the policy and administrative guidelines prescribed by the government or the central authority. Even in the legal aspect and the structure, the development of decentralization and local government in Thailand can be clearly seen. However, as mentioned above, such development is under the context of centralization or under the control of the central authority. The impact of decentralization practice in such a context did not comply with the principle of decentralization nor the principle of local government and administration, particularly the practice of decentralization discourse that affected the policy and planning, organizing and personnel administration, budgeting, and supervising or controlling local administration. This clearly reflects the over-control by the central authority of vital procedures in the local administration process as prescribed rules and regulations leading to limited autonomy of local government organization in local administration and development.

**Table 2** Summary of the level of impact of decentralization discourse practice in Thai local administration

<b>Decentralization Implication</b>	<b>Administrative Process</b>	<b>Policy and Planning</b>	<b>Organizing and Personnel Administration</b>	<b>Budgeting</b>	<b>Controlling</b>
Local autonomy	×	×	×	×	×
Self-government	×	×	×	×	×
Self-reliance	×	×	×	×	×
The will of the people in a locality	△	×	×	×	○
Mission transfer	△	○	○	○	○

✓ = The discourse practice complies with the text and the principle of decentralization.

△ = The discourse practice begins to comply with the principle of decentralization.

○ = The discourse practice complies with the text but not the principle of decentralization.

× = The discourse practice does not comply with the text and the principle of decentralization.

Table 2 indicates that the impact of decentralization discourse practice complies with the discourse practice (Table 1). Since most of the practice diverged from the text and the principle of decentralization, therefore, the impact of the discourse on local administration was apparent in

the same manner. The issue that was more advanced than the rest was the mission transfer that led to the practical impact in planning, organizing, staffing, budgeting, and controlling of the locality at a certain level. In regard to the will of the people, it was found that the people had more participation in development planning and in controlling than in any other procedures. However, their participation was not in compliance with the principle of decentralization as it should have been. Moreover, when comparing the implication of decentralization with each procedure in the local administration process the following discoveries were made.

**Local autonomy:** The impact of decentralization discourse practice in each procedure of the local administration process all had limitations that did not comply with the texts nor the principle of decentralization. The resultant impact had robbed the local administrative organization of its autonomy in policy formulation and planning, organizing and staffing, and budgeting. It was also administratively controlled by mechanisms of the government and the central authority more than necessary.

**Self-government:** The use of administrative power in accordance with the local administration process has its own organization or mechanism but must adhere to the prescription of the central authority. The resultant impact was that creativity in administrative process did not concretely materialize because the prescribed powers could not be utilized to undertake complete self-management.

**Self-reliance:** The impact of discourse practice was that the local administrative organization could not rely on itself. It must rely on the central authority for every procedure in its administration and operation particularly the dependence on administrative resources, namely the personnel, the budget, and the equipment.

**The will of the people:** In the local administrative process-from policy formulation and planning, to organizing and staffing, to budgeting, and controlling-the expression of the will of the local people was rather restricted. The policy and planning was the only encouraging activity in which the people could participate more than any other activities. On the other hand, organizing and staffing as well as budgeting mainly focused on adhering to the regulations and to respond to the central authority leading to the performance that did not comply with the needs of the people. In regard to controlling, although its impact complied with the texts but was not in accordance with the principle of decentralization because the mechanism in the third sector-that of the people-in such aspect was minimal when compared to mechanisms of the government and the central authority.

**Mission transfer:** This is the only implication in the Thai state policy of decentralization with more progressive impact than any other implications although the text was the decentralization law that had rather concrete mission transfer. But in practice, the outcome according to the texts was not successful. Despite the local administrative organization's legal powers and duties in policy and planning, organizing and staffing, budgeting, and controlling, such duties could not be undertaken to the fullest because the local administrative organization still had to adhere to the condition and guideline prescribed by the central authority.

When local administration process could not be undertaken according to the principle of decentralization as well as the principle of local administration and government it would have tremendous impact on people in the locality. If the local administration organization does not have the autonomy in administration nor does it have self-reliance, the impact would undoubtedly restrict its capability to provide public services, to resolve its problems, and to respond to the need of the people in the locality. The opportunity to improve the people's quality



of life by utilizing local resources according to the will of the people in the locality would also be restricted so much so that it could have a long-term impact on local development.

Development and resolution of the decentralization problem, therefore, should be handled through certain measures to undertake decentralization seriously, sincerely, and continually by straightforwardly bringing the stipulated principle and the will into practice. There should also be measures to reduce the controlling or supervision from the central authority. To effectively control the administration of local administrative organization in compliance with the principles of decentralization and local administration and government, various laws that are due for amendment must be carried out by abolishing the use of the “supervision” discourse since it seems to be good but in fact communicates the wrong issue. The word “controlling” should be used instead because it conveys the true meaning and is in compliance with the universal principle of control a priori as well as control a posteriori. Both words are technical terms in local administration and is popularly used. When decentralization takes place or the autonomy is granted to local administrative organization in a certain issue, it is imperative to allow the local administrative organization true autonomy in that particular issue. To achieve such autonomy, the locality can determine the rules, regulations, approaches, or methods of administration and operation on its own without the interference or command from either the central or the regional authorities.

## Discussion

The outcome of each stage in decentralization discourse practice according to the texts and the local administrative process was limited in many aspects in terms of decentralization to Thai local administrative organization. Most outcomes did not comply with the texts nor the principle of decentralization because of the distorted modification of the texts that resulted in the outcome that diverged from the principle. Such unsuccessful decentralization was, in fact, in harmony with several research findings. For instance, the work of Nelson (1998) that pointed out unsuccessful decentralization in Thailand due to patronizing political and social systems; Thailand is still a bureaucratic polity; the bureaucratic system still dominates and guides the people’s way of life; the central authority especially the Ministry of Interior has tremendous powers in governing and administration of the whole country. Krueathap and Others (2014) clearly emphasized the unsuccessful decentralization that led to very restricted role of local administrative organizations in urban and local community administration; most of the local administrative organizations are still unable to effectively and totally mitigate the problems because of lack of the decision-making powers and much needed resources.

The work of Mektrairat and others (2009) has pointed out that previous decentralization still had many problems, namely decentralization to local administrative organization that lacked autonomy, budgeting problem, personnel administration problem, people participation problem, and the problem of over-control. Charoenmueang (2004) addressed the slow process of decentralization because of over-centralization that left the locality weak in powers so much so that the locality could not deal with or mitigate their own problems but had expected to rely upon the central government instead. Findings of Na Chiangmai (2010) indicated that both the 1997 Constitution and the 2007 Constitution had clear intention to lower the roles of the central authority and the regional authority and to expand the roles and duties of the local administrative organizations. But in practice the size and the numbers of central government agencies had expanded leading to inefficient decentralization contrary to what was expected.

The outcome of such decentralization not only debilitated the autonomy but also the administrative powers and self-reliance of local administrative organization as well as seriously affected people in the locality. Because if local administrative organization cannot undertake the administration and other tasks according to the existing principle then it would certainly create the impact on public service delivery for people in the locality. If local administrative organization cannot formulate their own policy and planning independently according to the needs of their people, cannot autonomously organize and administer their personnel, cannot independently manage its budgeting, and is still controlled by the central authority more than necessary, then it would undoubtedly result in inefficient local administration and development to strengthen good quality of life of people in that particular locality.

## **Conclusion**

The emergence of all types of local administrative organization in Thailand (Subdistrict Administrative Organization, Municipality, Provincial Administrative Organization, Pattaya City and Bangkok Metropolitan Administration) has been specified and established by the government, therefore, autonomy of local administrative organization is rather limited. The principle of delegating local administrative and governing power, stipulated by the constitution and decentralization legislation, is, in general, in accordance with the principles of decentralization as well as the principles of administration and local government. But in practice, the central laws and regulations have specified every stage of decentralization practice in the local administration process. Such stipulation has eroded the administrative autonomy that the local government should have had. The result of the practice reflected the dominance of the central power that suppresses the administration of local government so that it must conform to the wishes of the state and the central authority. Local administrative organization has become a government agency similar to other state organizations even though its administration has been specified in the constitution to be autonomous in policy and planning, staffing, and budgeting. Such autonomy in administration of the local administrative organization should have been higher than and different from other central or regional administrative agencies because the other agencies do not have the same stipulation in the constitution or other laws. But in practice it was found that local administrative organization must adhere to the rules and regulations in administration similar to other agencies even though the power and authority of local administrative organization had already been specified by the law of establishment and the law of decentralization.

Consequently, the local administrative organization could not even implement its own power and authority without having to wait and follow the central government's regulation or those of the Ministry of Interior that local administrative organization must strictly adhere to. This issue clearly illustrates that local administrative organization does not have an administrative autonomy that differs from other government agencies or government services. In fact the local administrative organization must adhere to central government regulations just like any other government service or state agencies even though its power and authority was clearly stipulated by law for its administrative autonomy.

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