

Political marketing of military government: the case study of Thailand 2014-2015

Walee Preechapanyakul
Kawpong Polyorat

Khon Kaen University, Khon Kaen, Thailand

Keywords

Political communication, Political marketing, Marketing mix

Abstract

The objective of this research is to analyze the political marketing strategies used by the Thai military government in their communication with people. The data include the text of news concerning Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-o-cha publicized in newspapers, radios, and televisions. Textual analysis is conducted based on Almond and Powell's concept of political communication, Newman's concept of political marketing, and the concept of marketing mix or 4Ps. The social and political contexts are also taken into consideration. The research results reveal that the military government's political communication use radios and televisions to a greater extent than other channels. In addition, the four elements of marketing mix including product, price, place, and promotion are used as communication channels.

1. Introduction

Politics essentially deals with allocations of benefits to satisfy all of the involved parties' interests. In a modern society, politicians use several communication approaches in an attempt to create meanings and truth so that people would understand the message delivered by the politicians as intended. This meaning-focused political fight is different from the fighting style of the traditional Marxism which emphasizes action (e.g., protest, work strike) as a fighting tool (Bennett, 2005).

One communication approach used by current politicians is the one based on marketing principles. The marketing-based political marketing employs marketing principles to create and promote the image of political parties and politicians in several domains including (1) poll survey, (2) vote gaining, (3) public relation campaigns, and (4) formulation of political directions and policies. This marketing-based approach helps politicians to better reach people and sell their ideas and policies in a more concrete manner through the use of various marketing strategies (Bulakul, 2014). The role of marketing-based political communication is particularly pronounced in the last general election in Thailand where Thai political parties learned more about political marketing and made necessary adaptations accordingly (Panthongrak & Sawasdi, 2011).

Although politicians and political parties have employed political marketing in communicating with people with the primary objective of gaining the vote in the election, political marketing is also very important for politicians who come to the power without the election (hereinafter, non-elected politicians). Although these non-elected politicians do not need the votes per se from their people, these politicians still do need people's confidence, faith, and acceptance in the ideas and policies of the ruling politicians who do not come to the power through an election as in a typical democratic system.

This acceptance and positive feedback from people are particularly important for the government which rules the country during crisis where all kinds of conflicts are pervasive as in the case of Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-o-cha's government (hereinafter General

Prayut), on behalf of the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) who came to power on 22 May 2014 through a coup d'état. Given the way his government has come to power, gaining strong acceptance from people for the military government's policy and promise is a critical path to peacefulness of Thai society. Therefore, the researchers become interested in studying the political marketing strategies of this military government as portrayed in text in three major mass media including newspapers, radios, and televisions in order to build a better understanding and extend a body of knowledge in political behavioral sciences. The primary objective of this research is thus to study and analyze the military government's political marketing strategies that have been used to communicate with its people.

2. Theoretical Framework

a) Political communication

Almond and Powell (1978) argue that political communication has a fundamental role in a political system as it enables the existence of political system and the change of political culture. Although political communication may not immediately change attitude, it may incur an individual's cooperation and control. Five important channels of political communication include (1) face-to-face contacts, (2) non political social structures, (3) specialized political input structures, (4) specialized political output structures, and (5) mass media. The present study focuses on mass media as this channel can reach the majority of Thai people.

b) Political marketing

According to Newman's (1994) political marketing concept, marketing is a type of exchange process where sellers are the center of exchange and exchange their products with money in the buyers' or consumers' pocket. Sellers tend to use marketing strategies in conducting this exchange. When the marketing principle is applied in the political context, the exchange is no longer about goods and money. Instead, the exchange occurs where politicians propose various policies in exchange for votes from their people. In fact, the exchange can also occur in other forms. For example, the present study examines the military government's exchange of their policies with people's acceptance, confidence, and faith. In order to provide a clear illustration of this exchange process, the present study will use marketing mix as a study tool.

From the marketing perspective, marketing mix is composed of everything a company uses in order to influence or draw consumers' need for its products. Marketing mix comprises of four major components or 4Ps including product, price, place, and promotion. Product refers to the mix or combination of goods and service that the company offers to the target market. Price indicates the amount of money that customers pay in order to buy or acquire that product or service. Place deals with the movement of product or service from the organization to reach the target marketing. Finally, promotion include the activities that communicate the product advantages and persuade target consumers to buy the product (Kotler, 2009). This concept of marketing mix will be used to study and analyze the political communication of the military government in the present study.

3. Methodology

To conduct a textual analysis, the text used are the interview given by Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-o-cha during 22 May 2014 to 22 March 2015 as publicized by newspaper and broadcast media (television and radio). Data were analyzed based on (1) Almond and Powell's concept of political communication, (2) Newman's political marketing, and (3) marketing mix. The text was interpreted with the consideration to relevant social, political, economic, and cultural background.

4. Results

The research results reveal that in order to politically communicate with people, the military government use mass media to a greater extent than other communication channels. This is especially pronounced for radio and television. Since this government came to office, the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) launches a regular radio and television program entitled "Thailand Moves Forward" which has been aired daily at 18.00. This program is used as a forum for the government to communicate the government's work in economics, politics, and society as well as other several actions such as the royal artificial rain, solution for the problems in fog, smoke, and draught, Thai fisheries moving forward project, and the improvement of Thai labor to compete within the ASEAN Economic Community or AEC. In this program, the staff and government officials relevant to each of these works give an interview regarding the selected issues. In addition, there is another program called "Return happiness to people in the nation" which is aired on every Friday night at 20.15 where General Prayut talks and provides information on the government's work in various areas. These two government's programs are broadcast via The Television Pool of Thailand (TV Pool) where all TV channels in the Thai network are required to broadcast the same program. Furthermore after the end of the cabinet's meeting on each Tuesday, the prime minister gives an interview to mass media in the topics covered by that meeting at the cabinet office.

Based on the textual analysis of the text from various mass media, it is found that these texts reflect the political marketing of this government. The marketing mix is used in the communication with people in the several aspects including product, price, place, and promotion.

Product. The product that this government wants to offer to its people (who can be viewed as consumers) is the government itself. In this government, the cabinet members are mostly composed of professional soldiers and retired government officials and academics. It should be noted that none of the professional politicians are included in the list. The professional soldiers include General Prawit Wongsuwan -Minister of Defence, Admiral Narong Pipatanasai-Minister of Education, Air Chief Marshal Prajin Juntong-Minister of Transportation. Retired government officials include, for example, Pitipong PungbunnaAyudhya-Minister of Agriculture and Co-operatives. Academics include, for instance, Professor Rajata Rajatanavin, MD- Minister of Public Health. The purpose of forming the cabinet like this is to gain acceptance from people. That is, people can reasonably expect that the military government will govern the country to truly provide peace and people's well-beings without protecting benefits for any political groups.

Price. The results reveal that the price that people have to pay for this military government is "time" for the government to work. This "time" is, in fact, evident as the prime minister talks in the TV pool and often announces to mass media that his government would like to ask for time for a period of one year in order to build harmony and order of the country (Thairath, 2014a). In addition to time that people have to pay in order to exchange for the product, people also have to pay or sacrifice "freedom" due to the martial law which had been in effect since 03.00 on 20 May 2014. The martial law limits people's freedom in speech, news, advertising, and entertainment. People could not go freely outside their residence or express their political views as they used to. In short, the price people have to pay for the military government includes time and freedom.

Place. The textual analysis shows that the distribution channel for the military government to launch the product to reach the customers is the communication channel via mass media especially radios and televisions under the TV pool. With this system of mass

media, the military government can be ascertained that the message regarding the products features will be conveyed as the government intends. In addition to the two regular program launched since the government inception, six months later the government introduces more new channels to bring products to reach customers more readily. This new channels include a 1-minute radio program entitled "Thai Koofah". The program is aired every day during the morning news at 07.00 by Radio Thailand FM 92.5 MHz and all other stations in the Radio Thailand network. Next, a 5-minute radio program entitled "Happy benefits for people" is on air every Monday-Friday during a program called "BunteukSatanakarn" (or Situation Record) at 08.10 through Radio Thailand Station FM 92.5 MHz and its network. For television, there is a 3-minute program also called "Happy benefits for people" broadcast every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday after the royal household news through National Broadcast Television station or NBT and a 25-minute program called "Perd Jai Thaikoofah"(or Open Heart of Thaikoofah; Thai Koofah or Thai coupled with Sky is the name of the building where office of prime minister is located) on air every Thursday night at 21.30-22.00 through National Broadcast Television. There are also several English-speaking programs including a 5-minute radio program called "The Spokesman's Report on air daily during the evening news at 19.00 with a rerun in the morning news of the following day at 07.00 through the radio station FM88.0 MHz and other English-speaking radio networks. Furthermore, government's news pamphlets are distributed to people every 15 days. In addition, people can download the government's news mobile application. These new information distribution channels have a potential to result in people's better acceptance in the government product.

Promotion. The results reveal that since his first day in office, Prime Minister General Prayut has approved projects with a budget of over one hundred thousand millions baht including a 50,000 million baht budget as a credit line for rubber development and 34,200 million baht budget for low income people's housing project (Thaipublica, 2014). In a meeting of the committee for rice policy and management, the prime minister approves a project to provide credit for the delayed sale of rain-fed rice for the production year of 2014/2015. Initially, the Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperative will pay 80% of the market price. This committee which led by the prime minister increases the pay to 90% of the market price (Thairath, 2014b). It can be seen that these projects approved by the government are all directed at increasing people's acceptance, confidence, and faith in the military government which does not come from an election.

5. Discussion

Based on the concepts of political communication, political marketing and marketing mix, the current study examines the political marketing of the Thai military government using textual analysis. The results provide a number of issues for further discussions.

First, the fact that the military government communicate politically with people through mass media (especially television and radio) to a greater extent than other channels may suggest that these are the media that the government can control. It is possible that the government may want cooperation from individuals and control them to be in the direction that the government wants. As the government does not come to power with a normal mean but with a coup d'état due to the country's unrest, the government, therefore, strongly need to communicate with people to build an understanding and acceptance in the government. As a result, the media to be used for this political communication must consistently work in the same direction. This is reflected in our results where the government uses radios and televisions to the greater extent than other media in communicating the government's ideas, policies, and messages.

Second, in terms of the first element of marketing mix or product, it is found that the cabinet members of this government mostly come from professional soldiers, government officials with clean record, and academics. There is no one from professional politicians or political groups taking important positions in the cabinets. This is probably because the government wants to differentiate itself from the former governments where the cabinet members came from politicians or representatives of political groups. These professional politicians, nevertheless, were not able to solve the country's problems and unrest. Therefore the lack of professional politicians in this military government may be viewed as a new product offering which is expected to be liked and eventually accepted by consumers.

Third, in terms of price in the marketing mix, what people pay to the military government is time for the government to work and freedom during this period. Price should be in the level that consumers are willing to pay. It may take 2-3 months to implement the harmony-building plan and 1 year to set up the cabinet, draft the constitution and set up the reformation council to reform all kinds of things wanted by all relevant parties. After that, the normal democratic election will be possible. Despite the sacrifice of time and freedom, the government appears to be confident that consumers were willing to pay as the return will be worthy.

Fourth, in terms of place or distribution channel to move the product to reach the government's customers, radios and televisions are the primary channels. Furthermore, the government also provides English-speaking programs to cater to the need to foreigners who are the audience of the messages. It should be noted that the government has some limitations in using personal media to offer or communicate their product, probably because the majority of the cabinet members are not politicians, but professional soldiers or government officials. Therefore, they may lack the culture of political communication where politicians must go to the field periodically to meet and talk with people. In contrast, the military government has a military-like communication style-being straightforward, blunt, and concise- which may not be suitable for communicating politically with people. In addition, as the government came through power through an unconventional approach, it is therefore necessary to have consistent communication among several channels to avoid confusion or misunderstanding. As a result, the additional channels are likely to those which can be controlled by the government.

Fifth, regarding the promotional element of marketing mix, the government has a promotional campaign by providing budget to support credit lines for rubber and delaying the credits for rice farmers. Both rubber and rice are political commodities because they involve the well-beings of a large number of Thai people. Therefore, in order to inform consumers of the products and project the image that the military government is truly concerned for their people and really want to solve the country's problem, there must be promotion especially for the price of rubber and rice.

In conclusion, political marketing are implemented by using marketing mix to communicate with people who can be regarded as customers in order to gain acceptance, confidence, and faith in the military government which, in turn, will lead to the successful implement of the policy as expected. The ultimate goal of security and wealth for Thailand and returning happy to all Thai people would be eventually realized.

6. Recommendations for future research

As the text also reveals other marketing aspects in addition to marketing mix, future research may attempt to examine the military government's political marketing using other marketing framework. For example, the concept of segmentation, targeting, and positioning or STP and relationship marketing may warrant further examination and provide a better

understanding of the issues of interests. The knowledge gained from the new theoretical framework will provide us with more political literacy and people can avoid being passive audience of the military government's political marketing campaign. Furthermore, this knowledge may also be applicable for civil government. In fact, as the military government's political communication is unique and interesting, future studies may conduct a textual analysis using new interpretation approach (e.g. discourse analysis, criticism and deconstruction) and compare and contrast them with those of civil government.

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