

Ready or Not? Conditions for Readiness of Sukhothai Province to Become a Self-Governing Province

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Abstract

The independent study titled “Ready or Not? Preconditions for Sukhothai Province’s Readiness for Self-Governance” aims to examine the extent to which Sukhothai Province is prepared to establish itself as a self-governing administrative unit. The primary objective is to analyze the essential and sufficient preconditions for achieving self-governance at the provincial level. This is accomplished by comparing the current situation in Sukhothai with that of a “best-case” province—one that has already demonstrated a successful transition toward self-administration. The research employs documentary research as its main methodology, collecting and analyzing data from a variety of sources including books, academic articles, theses, research reports, television programs, video documentaries, and other relevant documents. These sources cover both domestic and international cases related to decentralization and the formation of self-governing provinces. The aim is to gain a comprehensive understanding of

the contextual factors, structural requirements, and policy implications necessary for provincial autonomy.

Findings from the study indicate that the preconditions for becoming a self-governing province can be categorized into two types: necessary conditions and sufficient conditions. The necessary conditions consist of three main elements: (1) a governance structure or administrative framework that supports the decentralization of authority from the central government to local entities; (2) appropriate budget allocation from the central government, along with financial support for local administrative organizations; and (3) an independent system of personnel administration that operates free from central government control. The sufficient conditions also consist of three factors: (1) a relatively dense population with urban characteristics and active civic participation in local governance; (2) the availability of natural, economic, or cultural resources that can support economic growth and promote tourism; and (3) adequate provincial revenue, a sound economic structure, and the presence of well-developed infrastructure and public utilities. This study not only offers a detailed assessment of Sukhothai's readiness for self-governance but also provides a framework that can inform policymaking in the area of decentralization. It highlights both the progress and the gaps that need to be addressed in order for Sukhothai Province to fully realize the potential of autonomous administration. Ultimately, the findings may serve as a guide for government agencies and stakeholders seeking to promote effective and sustainable local governance in Thailand.

Keywords: Readiness, Self-governing provinces, Decentralization

Introduction

The issue of decentralization has been a topic of national discourse in Thailand since the aftermath of the political unrest known as “Black May” in 1992. Since that time, political parties have repeatedly proposed policies advocating for the direct election of provincial governors as part of their electoral platforms. However, despite continued discussion and public interest, the direct election of provincial governors nationwide has yet to be implemented. Nevertheless, the policy of decentralization has evolved over time and began to take more concrete form following the promulgation of the 1997 Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, which marked a critical turning point in facilitating the decentralization of state power to the local level through legal and institutional reforms. The 1997 Constitution introduced a legal and operational framework that granted local administrative organizations increased autonomy in determining local governance policies, fiscal management, and human resource administration. It mandated that the central government must transfer authority to local governments, allowing them to manage their own affairs in accordance with the principles of participatory democracy. As a result, local administrative organizations were restructured to include locally elected councils and executives, reflecting the democratic will of the people. These developments culminated in the enactment of the Decentralization Plan and Procedures Act B.E. 2542 (1999), which further promoted the transfer of administrative functions and resources to local governments.

The core idea of decentralization lies in reducing the concentration of power held by the central government and transferring it to the local

level, thereby empowering local communities to manage economic development, utilize local resources effectively, and become more self-reliant—while respecting the aspirations of local citizens. Public awareness of and support for decentralization has grown significantly in recent years, especially following the 2022 Bangkok gubernatorial election, which reignited public debate and led to a widespread question: “If Bangkok residents can elect their governor, why can’t people in other provinces do the same?” This sentiment has catalyzed movements and campaigns such as “We’re All Voters: Provincial Governor Elections Must Happen” and “One Name to Unlock Local Government”, both of which advocate for nationwide elections of provincial governors.

These campaigns highlight longstanding inequalities between Bangkok and other provinces, particularly in terms of access to and quality of public services. Even within provincial areas, disparities exist between urban and rural communities. Such disparities underscore the broader issue: citizens across all regions of the country should enjoy equitable quality of life. With Thai society becoming increasingly politically conscious, there has been a notable rise in public scrutiny of the bureaucratic state, especially regarding its limitations in delivering effective public services and improving the well-being of local communities. The overly centralized administrative structure, characterized by rigid rules and limited local discretion, continues to hinder meaningful local development. Local administrative organizations, despite their official mandates, remain constrained in their ability to innovate and respond to local needs due to insufficient decentralization.

Within this context, the concept of a Self-Governing Province has emerged as a topic of academic and political debate. Advocates argue that

empowering provinces to manage their own affairs could lead to more efficient, responsive, and participatory governance. Yet, critics raise concerns about the readiness of local governments to assume such responsibility, pointing to factors such as limited budgets, inadequate administrative capacity, and the influence of local political interests. This ongoing debate has split public opinion: while some strongly support provincial self-governance, others caution against prematurely adopting such a model in the absence of sufficient readiness.

The key question thus becomes: What specific conditions must be met in order for a province to be considered ready for self-governance? This study was undertaken to explore that very question, focusing on Sukhothai Province as a case study. Sukhothai possesses several distinctive features, particularly in terms of its history, arts and culture. It is recognized as the first capital of Thailand and the origin of various aspects of Thai identity, such as the Thai script (Lai Sue Thai), the early concepts of free trade and governance, as evidenced by historical records found in the Ramkhamhaeng Inscription (Stone Inscription No. 1), which states, 'Whoever wishes to trade horses or cattle may do so freely.' Although Sukhothai is a small province with a relatively low population compared to Bangkok, Phuket, or Chiang Mai, it is considered to have valuable resources and assets that provide a strong foundation for becoming a self-governing province. The researcher examines the readiness conditions for provincial self-governance by analyzing successful examples of self-governing provinces in unitary states abroad—nations that share administrative similarities with Thailand. The study also considers domestic models that may serve as pilot provinces or prototypes for decentralized administration.

Ultimately, the goal of this research is to contribute empirical data and conceptual clarity regarding the necessary conditions for provincial self-governance. It aims to provide a foundation for policy recommendations relevant to the case of Sukhothai and to serve as a reference for evaluating the readiness of other provinces that may seek to adopt a similar model in the future.

Research Objectives

1.To identify and analyze the key preconditions that enable the establishment of a self-governing province, based on case studies of areas that have already successfully implemented such a model.

2. To examine the specific conditions related to the readiness of Sukhothai Province to become a self-governing administrative unit.

Research Scope

1 Geographical Scope

This study examines the Sukhothai's conditions to become a self-governing province, with a comparative analysis of the conditions found in areas that have already achieved self-governing province and those currently are in the process of striving to be self-governing province. The study draws upon cases from Japan, where the governmental and administrative structure aligns with the concept of self-governing provinces. It also examines international examples of regions that have successfully implemented self-governance, including Jeju Special Self-Governing Province in South Korea and South Tyrol in Italy. Additionally, it investigates areas in Thailand and

abroad that are in the process of transitioning towards self-governing status, namely Chiang Mai and Phuket Provinces.

2 Population Scope

The population comprises books, research articles, theses, research reports, television programs, video documentaries, podcasts, and related documents concerning decentralization and self-governance. The materials were produced between 1992 and 2023. The researcher established three inclusion criteria to reduce bias, ensure specificity, and control the quality of the selected sources; 1) Type of sources must be the research reports, articles, or multimedia contents from a government agency or reputable organization. 2) Language of publication must be in Thai or English. 3) Content relevance must address two key topics: “readiness conditions for becoming a self-governing province” and “decentralization in the context of self-governance”. The focus is on empirical data or in-depth analysis.

3 Content Scope

This research focuses on the readiness conditions for Sukhothai Province to become a self-governing province. The study references Japan's administrative model, which is aligned with the concept of provincial self-governance. It also includes examples from successfully self-governed regions abroad, such as Jeju in South Korea and South Tyrol in Italy, as well as domestic and international cases actively preparing for self-governance, specifically Chiang Mai and Phuket.

4 Time Scope

The study was conducted over a period of one month (October–November 2023).

5. Theoretical Framework

In this study, the researcher adopts a literature review framework based on two major conceptual approaches: the concept of Decentralization and the concept of the Self-Governing Province.

5.1 Analytical Framework on the Concept of Decentralization

Thailand operates as a unitary state, meaning that supreme governing authority is centralized at the national level. However, the central government may delegate certain powers to subordinate levels, such as local administrative organizations, regional courts, or provincial-level government agencies. In this regard, decentralization in a unitary state primarily involves administrative decentralization. For instance, the delegation of administrative powers from the central government to local administrative bodies, while legislative and judicial powers remain strictly centralized. Tanchai (2014) argued that decentralization not only enhances the authority of local government organizations but also promotes Thai democracy by empowering local people to participate in self-governance within their respective communities, which serve as the fundamental units of democratic development. Maolanon (2016) explains that the core principle of decentralization in a unitary state primarily emphasizes administrative decentralization—for example, the transfer of authority from the central government to local administrative organizations. However, legislative and judicial powers remain firmly centralized. This is characteristic of decentralization within the context of a unitary state. Nevertheless, there are notable cases of decentralization in other unitary countries that differ from the Thai model. For instance, in Japan, legislative powers have been granted to certain regions as part of a special form of regional governance.

Mektriratana (2008) further explains the principles of Japan's special autonomous region is the local governments as a form of decentralization from the central to local authorities. The central government grants administrative and legislative powers, allowing local areas greater self-management. This aims for flexibility and suitability for the specific context of each area. Japan's special local governments have unique governance models specific to their regions, such as the Tokyo Metropolis or the Osaka Metropolis Plan. These plans have administrative structures that differ from typical prefectures, for instance, by consolidating the powers of prefectural governments and city municipalities. Furthermore, establishing such a special administrative zone requires approval at multiple levels, including from the local government, the local populace through a referendum, and the National parliament. Japan's special autonomous regions have been established as experimental area for new policy initiatives—such as technology-related policies, free trade, or deregulation—with the aim of serving as pilot models for local economic development that can be applied to other regions. However, the core principle of special local governments lies in promoting local citizen participation. These governments emphasize enabling residents to play an active role in shaping the direction of their own communities, through activities such as electing local executives, participating in referendums, and engaging in local policy-making. This approach is grounded in the principle of local self-governance as enshrined in Articles 92 to 95 of the Japanese Constitution, which provide the legal foundation for the establishment of such special administrative zones. Yuvapurna (1960) categorized decentralization into two main forms:

5.1.1 Functional decentralization – the transfer of specific functions or responsibilities.

5.1.2 Territorial decentralization – based on political theory emphasizing electoral processes and self-governance within defined territorial boundaries.

This form of decentralization requires the establishment of local administrative organizations with independent executives and officers not under the command of central agencies. These organizations operate autonomously under the supervision (not command) of the central government. They are recognized as legal entities, have independent revenue sources, and can deliver public services using their own budget. Citizens have the right to elect their local council and executives. Suwanmala (1999) critically observed formulating a single set of policies intended to solve problems uniformly across all regions contradicts the complex realities on the ground. The centralized model of governance, which aims to standardize administrative practices nationwide, has proven ineffective in addressing the localized issues in each region remain unresolved by the central government. Karnchanaprakorn (2023) further advocates that the equitable decentralization of authority and fiscal resources to local governments can significantly enhance the quality of life for residents in provincial areas.

5.2 Analytical Framework on the Concept of the Self-Governing Province

The concept of a self-governing province is embedded in the 1997 Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, Chapter 5 on Fundamental State Policies, Section 78, which states that: “The State shall decentralize power to enable local authorities to be self-reliant and make their own

decisions regarding local affairs. It shall also promote local economic development, public utilities, infrastructure, and information systems throughout the country, as well as support provinces with readiness to become large-scale local administrative organizations, taking into account the will of the people in those provinces”. Based on this, the researcher defines a Self-Governing Province as a form of local administration independent from central government command, with elected provincial executives and councils. It possesses its own budget and personnel management, has full authority in policy-making, and autonomy in delivering public services and managing all aspects of provincial affairs—political, economic, social, cultural, environmental, and resource-related issues. The local population must also have mechanisms to scrutinize the performance of their elected leaders. Jirapongsuwan (2014) observed that in order to achieve self-governance at the provincial level, a genuine reform in power distribution is required—devolving power not only from the central government to local governments but further down to the people, communities, and civil society. Such a structure of decentralization will allow for the real establishment of self-governing provinces.

Wongsatayanont (2022), Chair of the Working Group on Civic Council for Phuket Province, states on Thai PBS TV feature – Scholars Propose Conditions for Provincial Self-Governance - advocates for Phuket to be recognized as a self - governing province in order to enhance local administrative efficiency and policy responsiveness. He advocated for leadership that is locally rooted and contextually informed, rather than centrally appointed officials who may lack an in-depth understanding of the province’s specific developmental needs. Phuket, in particular, stands out as

a province where over 90% of its economic output is derived from the tourism sector. Despite this, its five-year provincial development plan remains driven by directives from regional bureaucratic offices, with no clearly earmarked budget for tourism development, resulting in a significant misalignment between policy and local needs. Additionally, he highlighted the structural issue of administrative discontinuity, as provincial governors are subject to short period of approximately 2 to 4 years before being reassigned—undermining long-term policy implementation and institutional stability at the local level.

Yang et al. (2020) explain there are 5 key features of Jeju's Autonomy; 1) Self-Legislative Authority - Jeju can enact its own ordinances and regulations tailored to local needs—such as tourism, education, and environmental management—without requiring central approval. 2) Administrative Deregulation & Regional Specialization - Central government powers, including aspects of immigration (e.g., visa exemptions), may be devolved to Jeju, allowing it to operate as a Free International City and test innovative policies. 3) Control Over Personnel & Public Services - The province manages its own staff and local services—like education, healthcare, and policing—through autonomous police systems and independently-run schools. 4) Financial Autonomy - Jeju is empowered to collect local taxes, allocate its own budget, and receive a larger share of government revenues, supporting region-specific initiatives like digital innovation or environmental policies. 5) Decentralized Innovation Zone - Since its revamped status in 2006, over 4,600 administrative powers have been transferred to Jeju, allowing it to pilot cutting-edge policies in tourism, fintech, smart cities, and environmental sustainability.

Magliana (2000) states that South Tyrol has 6 factors to be an autonomy; 1) South Tyrol has held the special legal status of a “Special Autonomous Province” under the Statuto Speciale (Second Autonomy Statute) since 1972. This designation grants the province extensive legislative and executive powers, allowing it to operate independently from the central government in many key areas. 2) South Tyrol employs a balanced power-sharing system between the national and provincial governments. This includes the right to veto and the allocation of political positions based on the proportional representation of linguistic and ethnic groups within the province. 3) The region officially operates under a bilingual regime (German–Italian) and recognizes a third language, Ladin, in designated areas. This applies to place names, public documents, and government communications—demonstrating a strong commitment to linguistic equality and cultural inclusion. 4) High Degree of Fiscal Autonomy - The province retains up to 90% of local tax revenues, in accordance with the Milan Agreement of 2009. This financial independence enables South Tyrol to adequately fund locally-driven policies and development initiatives. 5) South Tyrol has its own Provincial Council (Landtag) and Provincial Government (Landesregierung), which are composed based on either democratic elections or proportional quotas that reflect the linguistic composition of the population. 6) The scope of the province’s authority is flexible and continuously evolving. It encompasses a wide range of sectors, including education, urban planning, environmental protection, transportation, tourism, and public procurement—allowing local governance to adapt to changing developmental needs and contexts. A comparative analysis of conditions for attaining self-governing provincial status across various regions

clearly reveals several core enabling factors. These include the presence of a supportive legal framework that legitimizes autonomous governance, institutional capacity in fiscal and budgetary management, competent administration of human resources, and the practical implementation of decentralization policies.

This study investigates the concept through examples from countries with unitary systems and administrative structures compatible with provincial self-governance. Key cases include: Japan (a unitary state with administrative models aligned with provincial self-governance); South Korea (Jeju Special Self-Governing Province); Finland (Åland Islands); Italy (South Tyrol), as well as Thai provinces with strong movements toward self-governance, namely Chiang Mai and Phuket. The aim is to compare these with Sukhothai Province in order to assess its readiness to become a self-governing province.

Research Methodology

1. Population

The population used in this study includes books, research articles, theses, research reports, television programs, video documentaries, podcasts, and various other documents related to decentralization and the establishment of self-governing provinces. The selected materials consist of research articles, research reports, and theses produced between 1992 and 2023.

2. Research Instrument

The researcher developed a documentary data recording form to systematically collect information from the documents. The form includes the

following key elements: Title/Program Name; Researcher/Host/Participants; Year of Research/Broadcast; Research Findings; Summary of Key Ideas; Source of Research or Broadcast.

3. Data Collection

The researcher personally collected the documents using the following procedures:

3.1 Searched for research, articles, books, television programs, podcasts, and other relevant documents from online databases both domestically and internationally.

3.2 Thoroughly read, viewed, or listened to the entire content of each document.

3.3 Recorded the information in the data recording form.

3.4 Analyzed the information based on the recorded data.

4. Data Analysis

The data obtained from various documentary sources were analyzed qualitatively. The study use comparative analyze the documentary data. The analysis aimed to identify the readiness factors for the establishment of self-governing provinces using a descriptive approach.

Research Results

The study reveals that the readiness for establishing a self-governing province can be classified into two categories: necessary conditions and sufficient conditions. The necessary conditions refer to the fundamental prerequisites that must be in place before a province can be considered for self-governance. Without these, the establishment of a self-governing province would not be feasible. In contrast, the sufficient conditions are

those that enhance the effectiveness, sustainability, and operational success of self-governance once it is established.

1. Necessary Conditions

The findings identify three primary necessary conditions:

1.1 Governance Structure and Legal Framework

There must be an administrative structure that supports the decentralization of authority from the central government to local administrative bodies. This includes favorable government policies and legal mechanisms that enable local administrative organizations to exercise autonomy. The central government must transfer functional responsibilities to local authorities, allowing self-governing provinces to independently formulate development plans and manage public services—either solely or in collaboration with other agencies if inter-organizational cooperation is required. While the central government may support local service provision through innovation, technology, or knowledge, it must not assume control over local operations. Self-governing provinces should also have the authority to engage in commercial activities independently or in partnership with public agencies or state enterprises located within the province. Additionally, they must possess the ability to review and revise outdated or unnecessary laws to improve administrative efficiency and reduce public burdens—known as regulatory guillotine. They should also be empowered to manage and preserve local resources, traditional culture, customs, and indigenous knowledge.

1.2 Budget Allocation from the Central Government

There must be an equitable and appropriate allocation of national funds to provinces, with fiscal support particularly directed toward

those with lower revenue-generating capacities. Self-governing provinces must be authorized to collect local taxes, fines, and fees in accordance with their specific policy objectives. A portion of the collected revenue shall be retained as provincial income, while another portion must be remitted to the national treasury.

1.3 Independent Human Resource Management:

Self-governing provinces must be granted autonomy in recruiting and managing local personnel. Local government agencies should be able to appoint civil servants and staff under a merit-based system, prioritizing qualifications and competencies. This allows provinces to develop a workforce responsive to local needs, independent from central government influence.

2. Sufficient Conditions

In addition to the foundational requirements, the study identifies three sufficient conditions that enhance the operational success of a self-governing province:

2.1 Population Density and Civic Participation

A self-governing province should possess a significant urban population and a strong culture of civic engagement. Local citizens must be empowered as active political agents, particularly through the direct election of the provincial governor. Mechanisms should be in place for participatory governance, such as participatory budgeting, where residents directly influence budget decisions, and public oversight through civic councils that monitor provincial administration.

2.2 Local Resources and Economic Potential

Provinces must have access to resources that can support economic growth and tourism. These may include natural resources (forests, minerals, agricultural goods, natural attractions), cultural heritage, distinctive local traditions, culinary identities, and intellectual assets such as geographical indication (GI) products or local innovations. Such advantages contribute to economic circulation and self-sufficiency within the province.

2.3 Revenue and Infrastructure Readiness

The province's Gross Provincial Product (GPP) and existing public infrastructure are key indicators of readiness. Industrial provinces with established industrial estates, manufacturing facilities, and robust infrastructure are more capable of managing public services efficiently under a self-governance model. Furthermore, self-governing provinces should retain full authority to collect and manage local taxes and fines. For non-local taxes, a defined portion is to be retained at the provincial level, while the remainder must be transferred to the national government. Provincial revenue includes both tax-based income (e.g., local taxes) and non-tax income (e.g., government grants, service fees).

Discussion of Results

1. Thailand's Unitary State Structure and Limitations of Decentralization

Although Thailand is constitutionally defined as a unitary state, it has undergone a process of decentralization from the central government to local authorities. However, this decentralization remains incomplete in practice. Despite legal provisions specifying that central and regional administrative bodies should merely supervise—not command—local administrations, in reality, local governments remain under the control of

the central government. The powers of local administrative organizations (LAOs) are narrowly defined under the Decentralization Plan and Procedures Act B.E. 2542 (1999), Sections 16–18, limiting their authority strictly to the scope outlined in the law. Consequently, if local governments wish to undertake new public services not explicitly authorized by law, they are legally prohibited from doing so—even when such services benefit the public. Conversely, the central government retains broad authority and may also implement overlapping services within local jurisdictions. For example, although the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) is responsible for the BTS Skytrain system, the Mass Rapid Transit Authority of Thailand (MRTA), under the Ministry of Transport, also operates urban rail systems in the same area. This duplication undermines local autonomy and prevents Bangkok from managing and benefiting solely from public transport services within its territory.

2. Central Budget Allocation Practices

The allocation of funds from the central government to provincial and local administrative organizations is determined by national policy and managed by the Department of Local Administration (DLA) under the Ministry of Interior. This process relies primarily on geographic size and registered population, with insufficient consideration for unregistered or long-term migrant residents who significantly increase service demands in many provinces. Furthermore, the allocation system fails to consider each province's revenue-generating capacity. Provincial revenue is divided into two parts: a portion retained as local income and a portion remitted to the Ministry of Finance as national income. For instance, Phuket Province, which ranks among the top ten in gross provincial product (GPP), receives relatively

limited funding due to its officially registered population of approximately 418,000—despite a de facto population closer to 531,000 when accounting for long-term residents.

3. Human Resource and Patronage in Local Administration

Local administrative organizations have their own personnel and civil service recruitment systems. While the selection process is nominally based on merit, patronage networks continue to influence hiring practices. Although not universal, such practices persist due to loopholes in the autonomy of local recruitment systems, weakening the perceived legitimacy and efficiency of public personnel management.

4. Population Density and Urbanization in Sukhothai Province

Sukhothai Province has a total population of 581,260 across an area of 6,596.09 square kilometers, resulting in a population density of approximately 88 persons per square kilometer, ranking it 51st nationwide. Urbanization is concentrated in Mueang Sukhothai District, with partial urban characteristics extending into nearby districts such as Si Samrong and the geographically largest district, Si Satchanalai. The remaining areas largely retain rural characteristics, which may pose challenges for achieving urban-style participatory governance and service delivery.

5. Civic Engagement and Political Participation

During the 2023 general election, 354,934 eligible voters in Sukhothai exercised their right to vote, accounting for 74% of eligible voters—slightly below the national average of 75.22%. Although this suggests a reasonably engaged electorate, local political participation remains relatively weak. There is limited civic mobilization, and local governance is often perceived to be influenced by political dynasties, with

several prominent political families active in the province. Civil society groups and mechanisms such as civic councils are still underdeveloped, reducing the potential for bottom-up political accountability and grassroots political innovation.

6. Cultural and Economic Resource Potential

Sukhothai possesses abundant cultural and natural resources that can support sustainable economic development and tourism. Known historically as the cradle of the Thai alphabet and the reign of King Ramkhamhaeng, Sukhothai is also famous for the Loy Krathong and Candle Festival, inspired by the legend of Nang Noppamas. The province boasts rich cultural heritage, including Sukhothai-style Buddhist art, architecture, and sculpture, with key tourist attractions such as Sukhothai Historical Park and Si Satchanalai Historical Park, both designated as UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Natural sites like Ramkhamhaeng National Park and Khao Luang further enrich its eco-tourism appeal. Community-based tourism is also prominent, such as Ban Na Ton Chan Homestay in Si Satchanalai, which offers visitors an immersive local experience including signature dishes like Khao Perb and Sukhothai-style noodles. The province also promotes geographical indication (GI) products, such as Sangkhalok ceramics and the locally cultivated “Monthon Phra Ruang” durian, exclusive to Ban Tuek subdistrict, as emerging economic drivers.

7. Income and Infrastructure Readiness

According to the Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council, Sukhothai's gross provincial product is valued at 48.739 billion baht, with a per capita income of 80,170 baht per year in 2021, ranking it 62nd nationwide. The provincial economy is driven primarily by the

service sector, followed by agriculture and industry. Despite having basic public services such as electricity, water supply, healthcare, and education, the infrastructure remains underdeveloped in certain areas. Notably, the province lacks a functional public transportation system, which limits convenience for both residents and tourists and may hinder broader economic development under a self-governance model.

When comparing the readiness conditions between provinces that have successfully established self-governance and the current conditions in Sukhothai Province, it becomes clear that while Thailand has made progress in decentralizing authority to local administrative organizations, this decentralization remains incomplete. The central government has not yet granted full autonomy to local entities. Although local governments have some authority, they continue to operate under the constraints imposed by the central administration.

In terms of fiscal capacity, budget allocations are made without consideration of critical factors such as the economic disparities between local administrative organizations and the inclusion of long-term unregistered residents in the population count. This results in an unequal distribution of financial resources. While local personnel and civil servants are under the jurisdiction of local administrative organizations, and recruitment systems are in place, the overarching control still limits full independence in human resource management.

Regarding conditions that would sufficiently support self-governance, Sukhothai Province has relatively low population density, with urbanization concentrated only in the districts of Mueang Sukhothai, Si Samrong, and Si Satchanalai. Much of the province still retains a

predominantly rural character. Civic participation remains modest, with limited grassroots political activity and public engagement in local decision-making processes. Although basic public services such as electricity, water supply, healthcare, and education are available, the absence of a public transportation system represents a significant gap in infrastructure—an essential component for the effective and sustainable operation of a self-governing province.

Nonetheless, Sukhothai holds a distinct advantage in terms of its rich local resources, including natural assets, cultural heritage, and indigenous knowledge. These elements offer strong potential for economic development and tourism that could support a self-reliant provincial economy. If the central government adopts policies that genuinely promote full decentralization, Sukhothai has the potential to become one of the leading provinces capable of successfully transitioning into a self-governing administrative model.

Recommendations

1. Policy Recommendations

1.1 The legal framework should be amended to grant local administrative organizations (LAOs) exclusive authority to provide all public services within their respective jurisdictions. The role of the central and regional administrations should be limited to supporting functions. Specifically, they should only intervene upon formal request from the LAOs—such as when local resources or personnel are insufficient. This change would establish the legal exclusivity of LAOs in delivering public services and managing local commercial activities.

1.2 The criteria for budget allocation to self-governing provinces and LAOs should be revised to ensure clarity and equity. Allocation decisions should take into account income disparities and the economic base of each province and its local administrative units. In addition, the population count used in budgeting should reflect both registered residents and long-term unregistered residents to better represent the actual service demands in each province.

1.3 Civic participation in local governance should be actively promoted. This includes advocating for the establishment of a Civic Council (Sapha Prachachon) in Sukhothai Province to enhance political engagement and to provide a formal mechanism for monitoring and holding local administrative organizations accountable.

1.4 The government should prioritize investment in infrastructure-based public services that serve both the functional needs of the population and the revenue-generating capacity of the province. Moreover, the tourism sector should be strategically supported, given Sukhothai's rich resources in natural heritage, cultural identity, and local wisdom. These assets are instrumental in fostering sustainable economic development and enhancing Sukhothai's readiness to function as a self-governing province.

2. Suggestions for Future Research

Due to the limited one-month timeframe for conducting this study, it was not possible to collect and analyze all relevant data. Future research should allocate more time for comprehensive data collection and analysis. Moreover, considering the dynamic nature of Thailand's political context, future studies should incorporate updated political developments

and consult a wider range of literature and sources to ensure accuracy and depth.

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