

# [Going home to Isaan: the end of the line for the “COVID-19 spreaders”](#)

written by Patawee Chotanan | April 17, 2020



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When Pol. Gen. Asawin Kwanmuang, the mayor of Bangkok, ordered the closure of all areas which posed a risk of COVID-19 to the public last month, he triggered a mass exodus.

A huge number of people who were living in Bangkok began making their way to their home provinces. Newspapers, television talk-shows, and the online media were awash with images of Mo Chit 2 bus station—the largest bus terminal in the country from which buses leave for the North and Isaan—jam-packed with people trying to get home.

How were these people even daring to go home at a time like this? Why aren't they listening to the government's repeated calls for people to stay indoors to limit the spreading of the virus? Don't they realize that, being all crammed together like that, if just one person among them had COVID-19, it would spread through them like wildfire?

These questions were surely on the minds of many viewers of this spectacle.

But let us take a moment to reframe the picture in question. Why aren't these people pursuing livelihoods in their home provinces? Why do they have to come to Bangkok to find work in the first place?

These questions ought to help us understand their reasons for going home at this time a little better.

## **All roads lead to Bangkok**

If we look at the history of the Thai state's development, the one thing that stands out very clearly is that the Thai state was fashioned in such a way as to centralize power. By design, the political power, economic power, and resources of the nation are monopolized by the capital.

This has turned Bangkok into an economic powerhouse, rich with investors from Thailand and abroad.

Notwithstanding, the Thai state drew up the first national socio-economic development plan in 1961, in a bid to keep communism at bay, and a Northeastern development plan was enacted in 1965. This included the establishment of many regional universities to improve access to tertiary education. The first three universities founded outside of Bangkok under this plan were Chiang Mai University in 1964, Khon Kaen University in 1966, and Ubon Ratchathani University in 1990.

Despite the clauses designed to devolve power and resources to the provinces in the 1997 constitution, political and economic power continued to be centralized in Bangkok, giving rise to the pithy refrain, "Bangkok is Thailand, and Thailand is Bangkok."

On the face of it, it would appear that Isaan has been well represented in parliament during past decades. Various government-forming parties, such as Thai Rak Thai, Palang Prachachon and Pheu Thai counted many MPs from Isaan in their ranks. Yet, the glacial pace of decentralization has failed to accelerate.

Then, the military coups of 2006 and 2014 came and turned back the clock. The powers given to the people to determine their own fates, as tentative as they were, returned firmly to military hands in the capital.

Since development has always focused on Bangkok at the expense of the provinces and their cities, the people here lack the agency to manage their affairs and resources in their own communities. This has led to a huge number of people, many of them from Isaan, heading to Bangkok in search for economic opportunities. Construction workers, taxi drivers, stand-up comedians, street hawkers, singers, office workers; Isaan is well represented in all of these fields of work.

For many, finding work all the way in Bangkok, with its high cost of living, is less than ideal. Yet, the chance to advance their social status, to send their children to decent schools, and to save money to improve the lot of their families back in Isaan continues to drive them into the maw of the capital.

The structure of the Thai state does not give them any bargaining power. This results in severe limits in terms of opportunities, the possibility of accumulating capital, and range of options available in life. It is hard to resist the prospect of Bangkok's huge market for employment and the chance to build up their own capital, even if it means risking one's health and wellbeing.

"Migrating to Bangkok for work" has become a cultural phenomenon in and of itself. When people go away to Bangkok and return with gifts of new household appliances, new clothes, or even vehicles for their parents, it is noticed by the whole village. While they're in Bangkok, they often send remittances back to their parents, which also tends to become public knowledge in the community. This inevitably generates enough hype within the village for friends, family, or neighbors to follow in their footsteps, most likely arriving to the same neighborhood in Bangkok.

### **When home calls them back**

Most commonly, after spending some time in Bangkok, what inevitably follows is that these Isaan people return home for a spell. In Isaan-Lao, this is called *muea baan* or *mia baan*, and there tends to be a few common reasons to go home.

First among reasons for "returning home" is the need to lend a hand in the planting season. Coming from an agrarian society, many of those working in Bangkok will have parents who still grow rice on the land that has been passed down for generations. When the planting is done, there is nothing for them to do so they go back to work in Bangkok. When the harvest season comes along, they again take leave from work and return home to help contribute to this other source of family income.

The second most important reason for them to return home from Bangkok is for important ceremonies or festivities, such as Songkran or the New Year. We've often seen images of masses of people getting ready to go

back to the provinces at these times. It's one of the few times of the year that they get to celebrate and eat together with family, before returning to Bangkok when their leave is up.

Thirdly, they go home to vote. Since the 2005 general election, more and more Isaan people have been making the trip home to vote for their favorite political party come election time.

The phenomenon of Isaan people going home in droves in order to vote is a relatively recent one. Many academics agree that it is due to the increasing awareness of the importance of their votes, after they recognized they directly benefited from the policies of the Thai Rak Thai party. The novelty of tangible benefits from government policy experienced by Isaan people has given rise to the epithet "democracy that you can eat."

The mass exodus to [vote in their home constituencies during the 2007, 2011, and 2019 general elections](#) lays bare the struggle between the authoritarian and democratic parts of Thai society.

Lastly, they go home when they lose their jobs. It could be because the factory they work at has laid them off in order to move operations to another country, for example. Some Isaan people will stay in the big city to find other work, but some will retreat back home to find their footing again before going out to face the outside world again. Friends or family who are also in Bangkok may well persuade them to come back home, or they may seek their fortunes in another neighboring province.

### **The COVID-19 exodus**

The order to lockdown Bangkok amidst the COVID-19 outbreak has resulted in a mass exodus of Isaan people back to their home provinces once again. But this time, there are some crucial differences.

Firstly, the lockdown occurred with scarcely any advance warning, making it impossible for those working in Bangkok to plan their journeys back home in advance.

If this was one of the farming, festival, or long vacation periods, or even an election or job loss, they would have known in advance and planned

accordingly. What happened instead was that many workers suddenly found themselves jobless as their employers were abruptly forced to close in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

[Virus outbreak adds to hardship for Chaiyaphum land rights defender](#)

The journey back to their home provinces occurred suddenly and with very little time for preparation. This resulted in the bus stations being jam packed with people trying desperately to score a ticket, any ticket, that could take them all the way or at least part way home, and away from Bangkok.

Secondly, they have to go back home as a matter of self-care (or defense?). When these migrant workers had to leave Bangkok, the government had seemingly ordered the closure of Bangkok without thinking about the logistics of how to actually get the people out of Bangkok.

There was little to no organization of the people who began to arrive at Mochit 2 bus station in numbers far greater than ever seen. There was no follow-up with these people—all potential virus carriers until proven otherwise—as they arrived in their home provinces. There was only a cursory screening process in Bangkok and orders were issued to all the provincial districts and village health volunteers to figure out ways to follow up on these migrant workers themselves.



Public health workers take the temperature of people arriving from Bangkok at one bus station in Isaan last month.

I was able to speak to a taxi driver in Ubon Ratchathani province. He said, "I didn't dare pick anyone up from the bus station. It scared me. They were only screening people during the day. [Those arriving from Bangkok] had all been crammed together on buses. The chances of catching the virus is really high. The airports looked a lot safer because they were screening people for every single flight, bar none."

I also went on a flight between Bangkok and Ubon Ratchathani. I can tell reader that passengers were still sitting right next to each other, as they always do. But at least every passenger was being checked with an electronic thermoscan device before boarding. Passengers found with high temperatures were taken aside to be screened even more thoroughly. Those travelling from high-risk areas who were not showing any symptoms were implored to self-quarantine at home.

Thirdly, Thai society has already begun to tar these people with the brush of COVID-19 spreaders, viewing them as people who refuse to comply with government orders to self-quarantine.

So why were they refusing to self-quarantine in Bangkok, and taking the risk of riding buses back to their homes? It's not because they were disregarding orders from the government; it's because the government was not able to help them survive in Bangkok after they lost their jobs. The government was not able to instill them with confidence that they would be able to survive in Bangkok on lockdown. Those among them who were day laborers, food vendors, etc., wouldn't even be documented in the government's social security schemes.

The areas in which some of these migrant workers from Isaan were living often presented a high risk of contagion. Some of them live in low-rent, very cramped urban spaces, or even slums. Bangkok has the highest numbers of COVID-19 cases in the country by far. The testing methods were prohibitively expensive for many, and the health system was inaccessible for the undocumented.

It should come as no surprise that the first thing on the minds of the scared migrant workers from Isaan was "home." That's why they took the risk of getting into the confined spaces of a bus for hours and hours on end with other potential COVID-19 carriers. They saw home as much safer than Bangkok, and certainly much cheaper to live in than Bangkok.

Lastly, this homecoming of migrant workers is one with no future in sight. There is no knowing when or if they will ever be able to return to Bangkok after this. Will their employers even take them back? Will their employers also call them selfish for not self-quarantining in Bangkok?

But most importantly, there is still no guarantee of any kind for their livelihoods in the future. The government is only providing 5,000 baht per month for three months for a select group of workers without social insurance.

If the government had provided or even just communicated that there would be welfare measures prior to shutting Bangkok down, the migrant workers may well have stayed in Bangkok.

The exodus out of Bangkok, which included many from Isaan among other places, was not a selfish act like the government or other parts of Thai society are calling it. They were not super-spreaders, as some parts of the mainstream media were calling them.

I agree that during a pandemic, quarantine measures should be strictly followed to check the contagion. But the travelling out of Bangkok by Isaan migrant workers under these circumstances is a complex issue that touches on the many structural failings of the Thai state. It is a product of the Thai state's jealous hoarding of centralized power and the sheer scale of its incompetence in the face of a pandemic.

Understanding the context surrounding this exodus helps us see that it was not a selfish act. They were just as concerned for their lives and the lives of their families as anyone else would be. If the people could cast a vote of no confidence on the Thai state, this would be it: they literally voted with their feet.

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