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Are Democracy and “Good Governance” Always
Compatible? Competing Values in the Thai Political
Arena

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**Are Democracy and “Good Governance” Always Compatible?
Competing Values in the Thai Political Arena**

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- *For forms of government let fools contest; that which is best administered is best.*

» *Alexander Pope*
» *(Quoted by Phraya Srivisarn*
» *Vacha in support of the*
» *Thai monarchical system)*

This oft-quoted aphorism of Pope underlines a fundamental tension between “democracy” and “good governance,” although the underlying concepts are often conflated in the literature analyzing “developing” nations. Constitution of these concepts, however, often relies on such different sets of indicators that it becomes difficult to ascertain whether they are related to any significant degree. One of the most commonly accepted definitions of “democracy” (that of Robert Dahl) relies on procedural indicators of electoral democracy: universal suffrage, elections registering voter preferences faithfully, unbiased choice among alternatives, and these choices or preferences become the basis for constituting holders of public office (Dahl, 1989), without reference to whether the government that is produced is “good governance.” Nor do discussions of “good governance” usually mention elections, whether democratic or otherwise. In fact, because the two concepts rely on very different criteria, it is not clear that, in the discourse, “good governance” includes “democracy.” Clearly, “democracy” alone is not a sufficient cause of “good governance.”

This dilemma is considered in an intriguing, brief article by S. Akbar Zaidi, *The Politics of Democracy and Good Governance in Pakistan* (2009). In order to make his

case, the author notes examples of “good governance” without democracy (Dubai, arguably, Singapore, and, specifically, Pakistan), as well as “democracy” without good governance (India). Because donor organizations have a high priority on “good governance,” recipient governments are expected to be “effective, honest, equitable, transparent, and accountable,” while for UNDP, a “good government” is expected to provide also for sustainable human development and “participation” usually in the form of NGOs rather than an electoral process. Military regimes thus are among the first to embrace some components of good governance, a condition in which there may be no rule of law, no government transparency, no free media, and no elections, but including responsiveness, efficiency and effectiveness.

One source of this seeming contradiction between “democracy” and “good governance” is the ambivalent attitudes among citizens as to the efficacy of democracy. This is especially the case in Thailand, where, in a poll taken shortly after the Constitution of 1997 (“the People’s Constitution”) became effective, 82.6 percent of respondents recorded that democracy was “preferable to all other kinds of government,” but only 51.3 percent felt that democracy was “equally or more important than economic development” (Chu, *et al.* 2008: 22). In other words, democracy is important, but other regime features may be more important than democracy. This tension and the seeming contradictions that may exist between “democracy” and “good governance” formed the cleavage that led to the overthrow of a democratically elected regime in 2006, and the subsequent removal of two successive governments after a semblance of electoral democracy was restored. Because this cleavage has posed the fundamental political polarization of Thai society, the underlying ambivalence in attitudes in which

“democracy” and “good governance” pose contradictory alternatives is the subject of this paper.

Measuring “Democracy”

The measures of citizen attitudes toward democracy in Thailand come from a series of polls taken from 2001, 2005, and 2007, coincident with national elections. These polls are based upon probability sampling of the entire Thai population of eligible voters, using a three-stage sampling process in which 50 (of 400) electoral constituencies are randomly chosen, followed by a random selection of 100 voting units (precincts) from across the 50 constituency units. Finally, roughly 1500 respondents are randomly selected from voting lists across the 100 voting units. Rounding in the final stage of sampling produces roughly 1550 respondents. Questionnaires are administered in local languages and dialects, ranging from the Lao-Thai (or Isan) northeastern dialect to Malay in the extremely southern Malay-majority provinces. This procedure produces distributions of the population that match census demographics coinciding with the turn of the decade.

Measures of the concept of democracy come from open-ended questions asking respondents their responses to a question, “When you hear the word “democracy,” what is the first thing that comes to mind?” Respondents were asked to respond up to three times. In the first poll (2001) only 80 percent could formulate an interpretation of democracy, and those who offered a second or third response amounted to only 25 percent and 7 percent respectively. The poll taken in 2006, produced only 63.8 percent who could form any response at all. Among those who did respond in 2001, however, 35 percent understood democracy in terms of traditional freedoms and liberties such as freedom of speech, press, and other forms of expression; another 27 percent understood it in terms of political rights and democratic procedures (Albritton and Bureekul, 2008:119).

Most surprising was the infrequent mention of traditional Asian values, such as “good governance,” social equality or duties to society. Only one person mentioned “openness or government transparency,” and no one mentioned job creation or welfare programs. Nor did anyone mention fighting corruption as an element of democracy. In other words, respondents did not include characteristics associated with “good governance” in their understandings of democracy.

The 2006 poll produced similar results. Of those who were able to formulate a response, 52.8 percent gave answers related to fundamental freedoms, of speech and general liberties, while another 17.4 percent understood democracy in terms of political rights, equality, and democratic procedures. The general conclusions from these sets of data are that Thai views do not differ substantially from the general meanings of “liberal democracy” in international discourse. Furthermore, these views do not vary significantly between rural and urban areas and are not restricted to Bangkok residents or the elite urban middle class.

A recent assessment of democracy in Asia argues that detachment from authoritarian forms of government is as important as commitments to democracy for assessing the overall level of support for democracy (Chu, *et al.*, 24). What is important to remember is that it is possible to embrace commitments to democracy and alternatives to democracy simultaneously (Shin and Park, 2003). The data from the 2006 survey of Thailand show that support for alternatives to democracy is not the opposite of support for democracy. Table 1 shows, rather, that when questions representing support for democracy and opposition to alternatives to democracy are included in a principal components factor analysis, the two sets of questions load on orthogonal dimensions. This result means that support for democracy and opposition to alternatives to democracy

is independent of each other. They can only be considered independently of each other and not combined into indices reflecting the relative weight of each dimension.

Table 1: Factor Analysis of Indicators of Support for Democracy and Opposition to Alternatives to Democracy

Rotated Component Matrix

	Component	
	1	2
To what extent would you want our country to be democratic now?	4.510E-02	.695
Which would you think democracy is suitable for our country?	-2.056E-02	.690
Which of the following statements comes closest to your own opinion?	3.179E-02	.602
Which of the following statements comes closer to your own view?	3.624E-02	.690
We should get rid of parliament and elections and have a strong leader decide things	.838	.118
Only one political party is allowed to stand for election	.859	1.716E-02

and hold
office
The army .835-4.164E-02
should
come in to
govern the
country

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

a Rotation converged in 3 iterations.

The Association of Democracy and Good Governance

The polls noted above also include questions indicating both evaluations and attitudes on good governance measures. They generally follow the categories for “good governance” set out by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, “What is Good Governance?” In this conceptualization, there are eight dimensions of what can be called “good governance”:

1. *Participation*. Previous research shows that there are many different forms of participation. There are as many as six different styles represented in these data that conform to the Verba and Nye typology. Questions representing what Verba and Nye (1972) would call “Campaigners” and “Contacters” are chosen here.¹

2. *Rule of Law*. Above all, the rule of law requires an independent judiciary able to check governments that usurp constitutional authority. When citizens have no such recourse, the rule of law does not exist.

3. *Transparency*. Information is freely available and accessible to citizens affected by government decisions and actions.

4. *Responsiveness*. Institutions and processes serve needs of citizens in a prompt and reasonable manner.

5. *Consensus oriented*. Society and government are oriented to consensus-building behavior, rather than conflict-producing behavior.

6. *Equity and inclusiveness*. All members of society are treated equally and have support from the society as a whole for improving their well-being.

7. *Effectiveness and efficiency*. Government maintains processes and institutions that meet the needs of society.

8. *Accountability*. Government is accountable to the public, the private sector, and civil society as institutional stakeholders.

These characteristics representing good governance are taken from the UNESCAP paper noted above. We have attempted to represent these concepts with questions from

¹ This strategy allows us to come close to the eight dimensions of good governance identified by the U.N.

the 2006 Asian Barometer survey of Thailand. When 28 questions are entered in a principal components factor analysis, the result is 9 natural factors representing the concepts of good governance, virtually on the specified dimensions (See Appendix 1).

These dimensions consist of the following questions²:

1. Participation:
 - a. Attend a campaign meeting or rally
 - b. Try to persuade others to vote for a certain candidate or party
 - c. Anything else to help out a candidate or party in the election(Second Dimension: Contacters)
 - a. Contacted government (administrative) officials
 - b. Contacted elected officials at any level
2. Rule of Law:
 - a. Between elections, people have no way of holding government responsible for its actions
 - b. When the government breaks the laws, there is nothing the legal system can do
3. Transparency:
 - a. How often do government officials withhold important information from public view?
4. Responsiveness:
 - a. How well do you think the government responds to what people want?
 - b. How likely is it that the government will solve the most important problem you identified?
 - c. How widespread are corruption and bribe-taking in the national government?
 - d. Is the government working to crack down on corruption and root out bribes?
 - e. Everyone is treated equally by the government
5. Consensus Oriented:
 - a. Harmony of the community will be disrupted if people organize lots of groups
 - b. If people have too many ways of thinking, society will be chaotic
 - c. Open quarrels (criticisms) among politicians are harmful to society
 - d. When a country is facing difficulties, it is OK for the government to disregard the law in order to deal with the situation
6. Equity and Inclusiveness:
 - a. These people (respondent specified minorities) should have the equal right to do whatever they want to do as other citizens
 - b. Their basic well-being should be taken care of by the government to the same extent as other citizens

² Questions are worded primarily in SD-SA format, or there are alternatives respondents can choose to answer specific questions.

- c. Thinking of whether you have voted since you were eligible, how would you describe yourself?
- 7. Effectiveness and efficiency:
 - a. How easy is it to obtain an identity document?
 - b. How easy is it to obtain a place in public primary school for a child?
 - c. How easy is it to obtain medical treatment at a nearby clinic?
 - d. How easy is it to obtain help from the police when you need it?
- 8. Accountability(?)
 - a. People have basic necessities like food, clothes, and shelter
 - b. People are free to say what they think without fear
 - c. People can join any organization they like without fear

What do these dimensions of “good governance” have to do with “democracy? What follows is an examination of relationships between each dimension of good governance and the two measures of democracy: “support for democracy” and “opposition to alternatives to democracy.”

1. *Participation*: Two forms of political participation are identified in the factor analysis: campaigning during elections (Campaigners) and contacting government or political officials. As it turns out, neither of the two orientations supports either form of political participation, as neither orientation comes close to a significant association with these forms of political participation.

<i>Campaigners</i>			
Variable	Regression Coefficient	t-value	Sig. of t
Opposition to alternatives to democracy	.0646	1.422	.156
Support for democracy	-.0266	-.599	.549
	R-square= .001		
<i>Contacters</i>			
Opposition to alternatives to democracy	-.0050	-.108	.914
Support for democracy	.0263	.587	.557
	R-square= .001		

2. *Rule of Law*: Questions loading on this dimension have to do with whether respondents believe that government, in particular, is subject to the rule of law. The minus signs of the coefficients indicate that both dimensions are significant in contributing to a belief that, in fact, there are no alternatives when government violates the law and that people do not have an ability to hold government accountable for its actions.

Variables	Regression Coefficients	t-value	Sig. of t
Opposition to alternatives	-.196	-4.257	.000
Support for democracy	-.124	-2.756	.006
R-square=.048			

Other questions related to the rule of law did not load on the same factor. When they are analyzed in a separate analysis, they prove to be an independent dimension of the rule of law. They include:

- a. Our current courts always punish the guilty, even if they are high-ranking officials
- b. When judges decide important cases, they should accept the view of the executive branch
- c. When the government is facing a difficult situation, it is OK for the government to disregard the law in order to deal with the situation

Both dimensions of democratic orientations are associated with the combined factor scores of this understanding of the rule of law in a positive direction:

Opposition to alternatives	.197	5.871	.000
Support for democracy	.135	4.040	.000
R-square= .057			

3. *Transparency*: Only one question relating to transparency appeared on the questionnaire, having to do with whether the government withheld important information from the public. This provides one of the most interesting associations, because here, although the two dimensions of democracy are both associated in a highly significant way, the signs of the dimensions run in opposite directions. The interpretation is that those who adopt a Churchillian view of government, that is, more highly opposed to alternatives to democracy, feel that government only rarely withholds important

information, while those most supportive of the democratic ideal hold that the government frequently-to-always prevents such information from reaching the public.

Variables	Regression Coefficient	Value of t	Sig. of t
Opposition to alternatives	-.1260	-2.831	.005
Support for democracy	.1880	4.294	.000
R-square= .056			

4. *Responsiveness*: Upon examination, this dimension in the factor analysis proves to be the clearest of all factors to interpret, primarily because it includes the response to "How well do you think government responds to what people want?" In this case, respondents opposed to alternatives to democracy are favorably disposed to government in terms of its ability to respond to the people and to combat corruption, among other characteristics. Nominal supporters of democracy are not associated with evaluation of government responsiveness in either direction. (Does this imply a commitment to democracy no matter how well it performs in terms of effectiveness or efficiency?)

Variables	Regression Coefficient	Value of t	Sig. of t
Opposition to alternatives	.1280	2.837	.005
Support for democracy	.0270	.613	.540
R-square=.017			

5. *Consensus Oriented*: Thais are quite averse to conflict, in general, so the expectation is that respondents supporting democracy will strongly favor conflict-averse attitudes. The finding, however, is that neither of the dimensions of democratic affinity are related significantly to consensus orientations. One possible explanation is that the significant cleavages in Thai society cut across both forms of attitudes to democracy, at least as they are expressed here.

Variables	Regression Coefficient	Value of t	Sig. of t
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Opposition to alternatives	.0309	.031	.501
Support for democracy	-.0695	-.071	.123
	R-square=.006		

6. *Equity and Inclusiveness*: Respondents were asked about a minority group they could identify, then whether these people should have the same rights as other citizens and the care by government offered to other citizens. Here, both dimensions of adherence to democracy significantly impact attitudes toward minority rights – only in different directions. Those who oppose alternatives to democracy are significantly supportive of minority rights, while nominal supporters of democracy are significantly opposed to granting equal rights to minority groups, perhaps the difference between “liberal” versus “majoritarian” forms of democracy.

Variables	Regression Coefficient	Value of t	Sig. of t
Opposition to alternatives	.2170	4.974	.000
Support for democracy	-.1780	-4.168	.000
	R-square=.086		

7. *Effectiveness and Efficiency*: These responses pose another clear dimension with loadings from questions about how easy it is for citizens to deal with government for obtaining medical care, a place in a primary school, help from the police, or obtaining an identity document. Both dimensions of democratic adherence appear significantly positive about the effectiveness and efficiency of the Thai government.

Variables	Regression Coefficient	Value of t	Sig. of t
Opposition to alternatives	.1220	2.709	.007
Support for democracy	.1170	2.646	.008
	R-square=.027		

8. *Accountability*: This is the least face-valid of all the dimensions. It does, however, indicate the ability of government to provide the necessities of life, as well as essential freedoms of speech and assembly (able to join organizations without fear). Nominal supporters of democracy appear to value these measures of accountability to the people significantly. Respondents who only oppose alternatives to democracy are not associated with this particular dimension of good governance.

Variables	Regression Coefficient	Value of t	Sig. of t
Opposition to alternatives	.0089	.1910	.848
Support for democracy	.1440	3.1760	.002
	R-square=.021		

Analysis

Treatment of the data above represents a modest beginning for a deeper analysis of distinctions between “democracy” and “good governance.” Perhaps most important is some movement away from scoring by panels of “experts” who hold highly partial, but always subjective, views as to the relative approaches to these dimensions.³ The attitudes noted above are based upon a premise, suggested by Diamond and Molino (2005:xi), that the “quality of democracy” is “indirectly related by the degree of customer satisfaction with it, regardless of how it is produced or its actual content.” This definition is incorporated in our questions measuring “support for democracy.”

It is important to note, once again, that the major measures of “good governance” frequently do not include elections as a component. The eight dimensions derived from the United Nations report include only a few of the components integral to “democracy,” but are generally composed of several indicators more related to social and political

³ It is always important to remember that the Freedom House ratings are of “freedom,” not necessarily of “democracy.”

environments independent of elections. The analysis shows that these indicators are not necessarily related to what most Thais consider to be the essentials of democracy. Rather they conceive democracy in terms of electoral democracy, rather than inclusive of the components of “liberal” democracy or components of “substantive democracy.”

Studies of democracy often simply report responses to individual indicators of measured attitudes and opinions. These studies often rely almost solely on “face validity” rather than using multiple indicators in an effort to create higher levels of “construct validity.” This study utilizes as many indicators as possible both for concepts of democratic support and for measures of good governance. In this respect, it is very important to note that the measures of affinity for democracy are orthogonal to measures of antipathy to alternatives to democracy. Because they are independent of each other, these concepts must be treated independently, as representing different configurations in the minds of respondents.

It is equally important to note the close correspondence between the concepts of good governance offered by the U.N. paper and the factor analysis of questions seemingly related to these concepts. What is most obvious is that responses to these questions do not load on a single dimension that we can call “good governance.” One implication is that individual respondents may have an affinity for one of these dimensions, but not for another.⁴ Such an interpretation is borne out in a comparison of the associations of the two dimensions of democracy with the varied indicators of good governance.

Two of these bear more explicit mention. First is the “Rule of Law,” where Thais seem to approve of the actions of the judiciary, but are cynical about the ability of

⁴ In fact, when the “good governance” dimensions are used to explain preference for democracy over economic development, only the “efficiency-effectiveness” and “transparency” factors are related. Both are negatively related to preferences for democracy.

institutions to control a government that breaks the law. The second is the difference in evaluations of government transparency, where respondents opposed to alternatives to democracy believe that government rarely withholds information from the public, whereas nominal supporters of democracy believe that government tends to withhold such information.

Conclusion

The preceding analysis represents a tentative presentation of differences between concepts of “democracy” and “good governance.” In this respect, it should raise more questions than it answers. What is most important is that ambivalent preferences for both of these dimensions often shape political struggles within developing nations. Our hope is that this study will transcend the conventional reporting of summary attitudes and opinions based upon surveys such as those utilized here. Perhaps, more importantly, it limns the underlying tension between how Thais view democracy, as opposed to their perceptions of good governance. The data from the eleven countries of the larger project include a much richer source of data than is presented here. If we have stimulated further explorations along these lines, our purpose will have been achieved.

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APPENDIX 1: Principal Components Analysis of Good Governance Indicators

Rotated Component Matrix

	Component								
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Attend a campaign meeting or rally	-4.023E-03	.134	-.128	-.257	-.127	-2.452E-02	.432	.290	.175
Try to persuade others to vote for a certain candidate or party	1.234E-02	4.923E-02	-4.301E-02	6.433E-02	3.013E-02	7.255E-02	.788	-6.856E-02	1.112E-02
Did you do anything else to help out or work for a party or candidate running in the election	-6.365E-03	2.283E-02	-6.693E-03	-7.663E-02	1.104E-03	-1.446E-02	.718	9.369E-02	-1.552E-03

government responsible for its actions	1.863E-02	.165-2.742E-02	1.622E-02-1.422E-02			.795 -8.059E-02-2.221E-02	1.165E-02
When the government breaks the laws, there is nothing the legal system can do							
Everyone is treated equally by the government	.216	.585	.262-1.201E-02-7.107E-02			.175 2.694E-02	-.137 -.103
People have basic necessities like food, clothes, and shelter	1.913E-02	1.630E-02	.526	-.337	-.290 5.322E-02		-.106-1.768E-02-5.582E-03
People are free to speak what they think without fear	.116	.144	.889 -5.420E-02	6.102E-03-5.150E-02-2.396E-02-1.954E-02			1.501E-04
People can join any organization the like without fear	.100	7.149E-02	.845 -4.036E-02-6.570E-02			-.199-2.838E-02 2.394E-02	.142
How often do government officials withhold important information from the public view?	-6.446E-02	-.160-8.151E-02	-.283	.108		-.126-8.449E-02 3.478E-03	.661
How well do you think the government responds to what people	7.914E-02	.716 2.468E-02	.116		-.135-6.361E-02	.103 7.117E-03 3.496E-02	

want?							
How widespread do you think corruption and bribery-taking are in the national government?	.146	.604	1.075E-02-6.464E-02	.148	.221-1.236E-02	5.194E-02	7.353E-02
In your opinion, is the government working to crackdown corruption and root out bribes?	1.660E-02	.686	-6.791E-02 3.773E-02	-.175-5.305E-02	1.485E-02	-.139	.316
Harmony of the community will be disrupted if people organize lots of groups	-5.982E-02	-2.259E-02	-4.031E-02	.259	.676	-2.845E-02	5.610E-02-9.236E-02-9.888E-02
If people have too many different ways of thinking, society will be chaotic	-.182	-.124	-5.166E-02 9.025E-02	.754	3.146E-02	5.662E-02-2.267E-02	-.114
These people should have the equal right to do whatever they want to do as other citizens	-.162	3.308E-02	-8.576E-02	.789	9.677E-02	1.917E-02-3.191E-02	7.601E-02 1.868E-02
Their basic well-being should be taken care of by the government to the same	-.133	2.026E-02	-.134	.818	6.242E-02	6.432E-02-8.614E-02	6.772E-02-3.561E-02

extent as other citizens Conflict-8.206E-02	-0.215	6.123E-02	1.122E-02	2.312E-02	.438	.102	.145	2.455E-02
among political groups is not a bad thing for our country	.101	-1.410E-02	6.228E-02	-.252	2.581E-02	-.124	3.554E-03	-2.738E-02
Thinking of whether you voted or not ever since you became eligible for voting, how would you describe yourself- have you voted								.740
When the country is facing a difficult situation, it is ok for the governme nt to disregard the law in order to deal with the situation	.103	-1.901E-03	.138	.196	-.642	-.119	.220	-.149
								-.197

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.
a Rotation converged in 7 iterations.