



A Comparative Survey of

*DEMOCRACY, GOVERNANCE AND DEVELOPMENT*

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The Politics of Polarization and  
Democratic Breakdown in Thailand

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## **Asian Barometer**

A Comparative Survey of Democracy, Governance and Development

# **Working Paper Series**

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**Globalbarometer**

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**The Politics of Polarization and Democratic Breakdown in Thailand**

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Thailand's political polarization is enabled by a structural condition—extensive inequality—and has been fostered by elite political competition. It is sustained by distinctive dynamics, including limited scope for rule of law or public deliberations, the ascendance of movement politics, and the emergence of new political and social media. Thai politics in this century have fissured, producing a dual regime, with competing conceptions of democracy and sources of legitimacy. The result is a yawning legality-legitimacy gap (Linz, 1976: 91-93).

Despite differences running through society concerning the nature of democratic legitimacy, the conflict is best understood as one with origins in competitive party politics. Political party competition leveraged existing differences in conceptions of democracy and may have bolstered them. That leveraging and strengthening might in the long run prove helpful to the deepening of democracy in Thailand. In the shorter term, however, it has produced deep elite polarization, extensive political mobilization, and a more passionate political divide that contributed to democratic breakdown, again, in 2014.

### *Background*

Recent political conflict in Thailand began to attain significant scale in 2005. It survived several elections, governments, and a couple of coups. The latest round of heightened conflict was triggered late in 2013 by the government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra's efforts to amend the constitution. At the same time, her government pushed through an amnesty bill that would have allowed her brother, Thaksin, to return to Thailand without having to serve the time in prison mandated by his 2008 court conviction.

Apparently in response to these developments, a new political movement, the People's Democratic Reform Council (PDRC), blossomed forth to demand the withdrawal of the amendment bids and the amnesty bill, and the resignation of the government. The Yingluck government complied with these demands, calling new elections. In a fateful move, the PDRC upped the ante, insisting that new elections be deferred until a package of unspecified political reforms could be implemented under an appointed government. The movement was able to disrupt and thereby nullify elections held in early February. Stalemate resulted and, as it dragged on, saw rising levels of political violence, paving the way for the military's seizure of power in May 2014.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. The section immediately below briefly asks whether or not democracy broke down in Thailand in 2014 and in what senses Thailand is deeply polarized. The next section discusses the many competing and complementary understandings of the political and social forces driving Thailand's political divide. The section concludes with a discussion of several distinctive features of Thai society that contribute to an understanding of the political conflict. The discussion notes factors that make Thailand's experience with democracy distinctive, even unique. Subsequently, the paper examines some of the underlying dynamics of the Thai case that help to account for the failure of democracy. Thereafter, the paper examines the consequences of the most recent democratic collapse and of the larger political conflict that induced the collapse. The paper

concludes with a consideration of Thailand's political prospects and possible means of mitigating the forces that contributed to its democratic breakdown.

### **Did democracy break down in Thailand?**

Anti-Thaksin forces were prone to insisting that Thailand, under Thaksin or any of his lieutenants or relatives, was not a democracy. Yes, democracy determined who exercised executive and legislative power. But what determined how Thais voted? Kapstein and Converse raised the question whether Pakistan, given its feudal structure and the influence of that structure on voting, should be considered a democracy (Kapstein and Converse, 2008: 107). Similarly, many Thais asked how Thailand could be considered a democracy given the scale of vote buying. Even if direct vote buying had declined, or if its effects had declined (a point disputed by many), was not Thaksin buying support by offering popular policies? While such a view seems blind to one of democracy's central promises, it may nonetheless be true that Thai voters' instrumental localism is particularly pronounced.<sup>1</sup>

An alternative line of argument popular before the 2006 coup ended Thaksin's stint as prime minister had it that his control over state-owned (almost all) television<sup>2</sup> and radio vitiated one of democracy's key conditions. (Thaksin did not establish as much control over the press, but only five per cent or fewer Thais relied heavily on the press for their political news and of that number most were reading newspapers sympathetic to Thaksin.) As for Thaksin's backers, they certainly felt that Thailand's democracy was at the least highly circumscribed given active policing by the courts and accountability institutions that together brought down two Thaksin-linked governments in 2008 and another in 2014.

A somewhat more abstract argument had it that the prevailing conception of democracy Thailand emphasizing majority rule was illegitimate. This argument suggested that Thais did not emphasize democratic norms and procedures, or political liberties, all of which Thaksin threatened. Neither did Thais emphasize good government. Majority support for Thaksin, according to this view, rested on the belief that he delivered to relatively less well-off Thais valued resources and services, an allegedly inadequate basis on which to choose national political leaders.

Lu finds some support for the notion that an instrumental view of democracy was particularly strong in Thailand (as well as Japan and Taiwan!; Lu, 2012). Based on Asian Barometer data (wave three) from eleven Asian countries, Thais were the third most apt to cite government narrowing of income gaps as a defining feature of democracy (China was second, Taiwan first). Few Thais cited freedom to organize political groups as a defining feature (lower only in China and, perhaps, Vietnam). The number of Thais noting freedom to protest (6.9 per cent) was lower only in China, Japan, and perhaps Vietnam. Only in Malaysia (45.3 per cent) and South Korea (43.8 per cent) did more respondents point to government

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<sup>1</sup> There is a fairly large gap in responses to the Asian Barometer question concerning whether people should be primarily responsible for themselves or whether government ought to assume main responsibility. Nationally, Thais divided 44.2% to 47.5%. The figures for those identifying with the Democrat Party were comparable (44.6% and 46.9%). For those identifying with the *Pheu Thai* Party, the figures were 36.6% and 58.1%.

<sup>2</sup> Until Sondhi Limthongkul's revolutionized Thailand's media, the only privately owned television station was owned by Thaksin. iTV was created in the wake of the 1992 demonstrations for democracy to break the state monopoly on television. It performed well until it came under Thaksin's control, before he became prime minister.

provision of quality public services than in Thailand (43 per cent). Only in Taiwan (40 per cent) and Mongolia (39.8 per cent) did more respondents cite government ensuring job opportunities than in Thailand (38.7 per cent). More Thais than in any other country (36.6 per cent) pointed to state unemployment assistance. Fewer Thais (16 per cent) than in any other country cited provision of law and order. Perhaps only in Vietnam did fewer respondents than in Thailand (9.8 per cent) note courts protecting people from arbitrary exercise of government power as a key characteristic of democracy.

The picture that emerges, alas, is not uniform. Thais did not point in large numbers to free and fair elections to choose their leaders as a distinguishing feature of democracy. That option was cited by only 16.6 per cent of Thais, lower than in any other country except, perhaps, Vietnam. Only in Mongolia and China did more respondents than in Thailand point to legislative oversight of the executive. And more Thais than in any of the other ten countries selected multi-party electoral competition as a defining feature of democracy. Nonetheless, averaging rankings of the eleven countries on four measures of a procedure-based conception of democracy, Thailand ranked second lowest, perhaps above Vietnam and just below China (and Japan!; Lu, 2012). In any case, satisfaction with how democracy was working (combining very satisfied and fairly satisfied) in Thailand was strong, and rebounded in 2010-11 (78.6%) after its fall in 2006 (66.7%) from its higher level in 2002 (90.5%). Against this more or less encouraging news, however, the rates at which Thais rejected military or strong man rule fell (Chang, Chu, and Diamond, 2012). A couple of other discouraging numbers are worth noting. A fairly large gap was evident between rural and urban Thais in response to a question concerning their preference for a system of multi-party competition against the unity associated with one party representing everyone. While urban Thais' preferences were 82% and 6% respectively, rural Thais commitment to party competition figure clearly was weaker, with figures of 64.7% and 25.3%. Looking at differences in answers to the same question by Thais with different levels of education, a strong pattern emerges with the multi-party option preferred by 52.6% of the least educated and 74.5% of the most educated.

There are no grounds for doubt that a plurality or majority of Thais have supported Thaksin's parties at the polls. Those results depended not only on Thaksin being able to buy successful candidates, but probably more so on people voting in support of Thaksin himself (the term "party voting" is not appropriate).<sup>3</sup> What is far less clear, however, is the extent to which polarization extended beyond support for, or opposition to, Thaksin. There were few important policy and perhaps no ideological differences separating Thaksin and his opponents. The "royalist" and "elite-backed" Democrat Party when in power (2008-2011) tried to match the Thaksin parties in redistributive spending and exceeded the latter in its proposed redistributive taxation policies. There may have been a sharp divide between backers of Thaksin's parties and others on commitment to electoral procedures, but it seems likely that except among those confident of the success of their preferred candidates or parties such a

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<sup>3</sup> The share of those answering "none" when asked with which party they feel closest was 58.6, 72, and 62.5% over the three Asian Barometer waves. The share identifying with Thaksin's parties was 22.3, 18.5, and 12.5. The drop in 2010-11 may have had to do with confusion over the party's latest name. Another anomaly in the most recent data has a full 20.5% of Thais identifying with the Democrat Party (figures in earlier surveys were lower and surely more realistic).

commitment was far from uniform within either group. Nonetheless, only relatively elite Thais would be likely to have feeling of efficacy (*chutzpah*) great enough to actively seek to overturn election results.

We seem to be on reasonably sure ground accepting that it was democracy that broke down in Thailand and that the country is in some senses now polarized politically. What more can we say about the causes of that polarization?

### **What are they fighting about?**

It is not easy, for some analysts, to say just what it is that Thais have been fighting about since 2005. One popular perspective, however, paints a coherent picture. According to this portrait, Thailand had a combination of elements conducive of an almost predictable conservative and repressive political alliance. These elements included high income, wealth and status inequality; deeply entrenched elites, including a traditionally rooted monarchy; a powerful military with a penchant for grabbing power but closely tied to the monarchy (a sort of praetorian guard); a highly hierarchical society; and an “ethnic” divide between wealthy and urban “Chinese” elites and rural and poor Thais (of Thai, Cambodian, Lao, and other descent). This there-is-no-puzzle perspective gained currency as Thai elites struggled from 2005 to curb the democracy-rooted power of Thaksin.

The puzzle-free picture is not entirely convincing. Why was it that so many rural voters, once the backbone of support for military-based political parties, were now committed democrats?<sup>4</sup> Why were the former student-communists of the 1970s, many of them formerly at the heart of Thailand’s first mass-based movement in support of democracy, divided, with perhaps most of them opposed to Thaksin, his political parties, and the United Front for Democracy and Against Dictatorship (the UDD, or Red Shirts)? Why were so many figures, perhaps a majority, associated with Thailand’s NGOs and assorted public intellectuals opposed to Thaksin and his political instruments?

Clearly, Thaksin challenged the previous narrow confines within which competition for political power was conducted in Thailand.<sup>5</sup> He had the imagination and vaunting ambition to seek to transcend the system’s traditional bounds, holding the promise of making democracy more meaningful. He appealed to Thais who as a result of massive social changes and relatively brief economic bad times may have been ripe for political mobilization by a plutocrat in a white Porsche. As Thaksin butted up against deeply entrenched elite opposition, he leaned more

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<sup>4</sup> In the two elections of 1992, for example, the military-linked parties did particularly well (they won a plurality in the first round of elections) in the Northeast, the region that, along with the North, served as Thaksin’s key, committed electoral base. More consistent with the there-is-no-puzzle perspective, in earlier decades Northeasterners were prominent among supporters of the *Seri Thai* group that resisted the alliance between the Thai military and Japan during World War II and the region hosted considerable communist insurgent activity through the 1970s.

<sup>5</sup> Much of the discussion of the conflict’s background conditions and elsewhere draws on “Thailand’s Democracy. Politics Outside the Iron Cage,” an unpublished manuscript by Danny Unger and Chandranuj Mahakanjana.

heavily on his advantage in support among Thailand's newly aroused voters (Roberts, 2006). His supporters, as Disraeli's fictional account of nineteenth century England had it, "no longer believe in any innate difference between the governing and governed classes of this country. They are sufficiently enlightened to feel they are victims (Disraeli, 2008: 227)."

The easiest way to think about the Thai political conflict was as a class conflict. Thaksin and most of the Red Shirt leaders were wealthy, but by itself this did not fatally undermine the class interpretation. More infirming was that the movement was not concerned, except in a minor way, with redistributing incomes. It gave no particular emphasis to equalizing educational opportunities. Sharp class differences were necessary but insufficient conditions for the conflict. The gulf in material circumstances figured in the conflict primarily in the sense that the relatively dispossessed voters of the North and Northeast constituted Thaksin's most powerful weapon<sup>6</sup> and made it possible for him to survive judicial and military attacks. It was indeed not possible to think about the conflict without attention to Thailand's wide economic and social disparities.

So what else was the conflict about? Most fundamentally, perhaps, the sustained nature of the conflict was a product of distrust and the weakness of neutral arbitration or procedural mechanisms, including the rule of law. Weak rule of law make the Thaksin phenomenon possible and made the achievement of enduring elite bargains difficult.<sup>7</sup>

We can array the various understandings of Thailand's political conflict schematically, as in Figure 1, below. The explanations differ on two central dimensions: their understandings of the groups in conflict (elites versus elites or haves versus have-nots); and the core values in conflict (material or symbolic). These two dimensions yield a two-by-two table with four cells, three of which capture popular explanations of the conflict. For example, many explanations suggest the conflict is fundamentally rooted in material inequalities, or class conflict. These explanations suggest the conflict pits rich against poor, or urban against rural, or perhaps liberal against authoritarian populist.

Others see a conflict between haves and have-nots that has more to do with social recognition than assets or incomes. These explanations describe a conflict between old elites and the rest, or between the elite and the excluded, or perhaps between good (well born and refined, or simply virtuous) and bad (unscrupulous, venal, uncouth) people, or even between people exhibiting "Thainess" (tolerance, conflict avoidance, embrace of affect-laden human relations, reverence for the king's majesty) and others failing to do so. This cell might also be understood to encompass understandings that pit liberals against democrats.

Still others believe the conflict is fundamentally between the palace and Thaksin, between old elites and new ones, or some sort of intra-elite struggle over largely symbolic values. The fourth cell features

<sup>6</sup> From 2006, particularly from 2010 and the 2011 elections, international pressure also was a major factor.

<sup>7</sup> There seems to have been a deal between Thaksin and the outgoing Democrat Party-led government around the time of the 2011 elections. One side of the other also seems to have defected from the agreement late in 2013, perhaps leading to the rising tensions of that period.



intra-elite battle over material values. The more entrenched elites derive advantages from their proximity to the palace and oppose challenging elites who hitched their wagons to Thaksin's ascendancy. Various activists, journalists, and scholars have suggested that the conflict is for control of the huge assets of the Crown Property Bureau or even over Thailand's trade policy regime (should Thailand sign on to the U.S.-sponsored Trans Pacific Partnership?)

These four cells do not do full justice to the array of factors at play in the conflict. It is not easy, for example, to place procedural differences (pluralists versus autocrats; liberals versus democrats; those emphasizing rule of law and procedure versus those emphasizing majority rule and substantive outcomes) within the scheme. Furthermore, there are important cultural and structural factors that are not captured in the two-by-two array. Among the key structural factors, in addition to income inequality, are weak third party enforcement mechanisms, weak institutions, and the relatively unbounded nature of the stakes in play. Cultural factors refer to low levels of trust; poor quality deliberations; conflict avoidance, at least in face-to-face contexts; enchantment; personalism; and (betraying some conceptual fuzziness), again, weak institutions.

There are reasons for doubting, as already noted, that material interests were central to the conflict. For example, Thaksin's *Thai Rak Thai* party campaigned publicly in 2001 on a platform that highlighted several populist programs. The party nevertheless won strong elite support in Bangkok. Were elites tolerant of initial levels of populist policies but opposed to their subsequent expansion? Did they never believe that Thaksin would implement the policies? It seems more likely that the key sources of elite opposition to Thaksin lay elsewhere.

Much discussion of the conflict among Thai citizens as well as scholars focused on issues of false consciousness. Some of Thaksin's opponents believed he and his minions had a lock on Northern and Northeastern rural voters in substantial part because Thaksin and company had been able to hoodwink voters into believing that their governments were the first to address the concerns of rural Thailand. Some Thaksin supporters (this view probably was more popular among intellectuals; e.g., Ivarsson and Isager, 2010) saw decades of royal mystification having confused Thais, deflecting them from supporting democracy unconditionally.

Thailand is in the midst of a long, unfolding political conflict. Only hindsight might reveal which of the apparent enormous changes that have emerged in Thailand over recent decades will prove more ephemeral. For now, it is as if somewhere in Thailand "a kind of universal joint" has shifted, unlocking political energies and passions and clearing the way for long obstructed changes (Manchester, 1992: 174). Thais found themselves in a vertiginous terrain in which "Everything that was no longer exists; everything that is to be does not yet exist" (Musset in Barzun, 2000: 491).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The better known version is from Antonio Gramsci, "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear" (Gramsci, 1971).

Figure 1: Understandings of Thailand's Political Conflict

		<u>Groups in conflict</u>	
		<i>Intra-elite</i>	<i>Class</i>
<u>Values in conflict</u>	<i>Material issues</i>	Free trade vs. Protection Assets of Crown Property Bureau	Conservative/Economic Liberal vs. Populist Rich vs. Poor Urban vs. Rural
	<i>Symbolic or social equality issues</i>	Thaksin vs. Monarchy Old Elites vs. All Others	Elites vs. Excluded Liberals vs. Democrats Rule of Law vs. Majoritarianism "Thainess" vs. Other Good vs. Bad People
<u>Diverging procedural preferences</u>	Pluralist vs. Autocrat Liberals vs. Democrats Rule of Law vs. Majoritarianism		
<u>Dynamics of conflict</u>	Structural features	Inequality; no third party enforcement; weak institutions; unbounded stakes	
	Cultural features	Low trust; poor deliberations; conflict avoidance; enchantment; personalism; weak institutions	

The freighted Thai phrase “Now we see clearly” (*taa sawaang*) was often used to capture this sense of novelty in the political landscape and Thais’ political consciousness. There was little doubt but that radical changes, albeit of uncertain depth and staying power, were afoot. The palace signaled dissatisfaction with Thaksin’s political leadership. In the past, political leaders confronting such opposition would have had to step down. Thaksin did not. In the context of mass street politics, criticism of the monarchy from the stage before thousands of demonstrators seemed to many Thais unprecedented, as something that “never happened before within the Thai cultural setting” (Chongkittavorn, 2012: 322-3). Extensive Thai restrictions on free speech (primarily the lese-majeste law) hobbled understanding and discussion of the conflict. It is not at all certain that had his opponents not been able to hint repeatedly that Thaksin and the palace were antagonists, that their efforts to oppose Thaksin would have achieved such impressive results.

On the one side, a traditional elite view has it that Thais were fortunate to be able to lean on the king until such time as they had entrenched a political system that could manage things without him. There was some suggestion that the 1997 constitution was designed to address the need to root a system that no longer would depend on him (McCargo, 2002). The king’s steadying influence helped to explain why Thailand’s political trajectory was so much steadier than that of its Theravada Buddhist neighbors. In 1973 and 1992 the king had been forced to intervene directly to save democracy. On the other side emerged an increasingly prominent counter narrative. This alternative interpretation pointed to risks in excessive dependence on the king’s influence. More negatively, the king’s influence, or even lack thereof, in 1976 was cited to dispute the notion that the king was a champion of democracy, however gradually achieved.

An institutional, palace-centered, arrangement that once “worked” well came to seem anachronistic to some Thais. Political attitudes and institutions that in many respects were “successful” in the context of the low participation polity of the past needed to change to accommodate new more participatory conditions. Thais confronted the task of feeling their way toward a new dispensation, one that could encompass excluded but emerging social groups and their aspirations in a modified and more participatory political system.

However we understand Thailand’s political conflict, it is clear that (at least anti-Thaksin) Thais have yet to commit themselves to the institutionalization of uncertainty (Przeworski, 1991: 1-14) associated with democracy’s reliance on procedural norms to determine which groups have access to political power. Reaching agreement to have regular recourse to democratic elections to determine which groups control executive and legislative power is a significant achievement. The anxiety created by uncertainty as to which groups will wield executive power is apt to be particularly great where the institutions that serve to moderate the span of the stakes at play are

feeble.<sup>9</sup> Where winners are able to take all, the stakes assume such magnitude that the players are more apt to refuse to abide by the game's rules for determining access to power. Commitment to abide by electoral outcomes is harder still when many voters believe their fellow citizens are embracing rule by fundamentally bad people. The difficulties mount further still when those bad people are seen as antipathetic to a quasi-divine figure viewed by the good people as the country's lodestone.

It will be helpful to examine some specific elements of Thai politics in more detail.

### *Thailand's distinctive features*

Five features of Thai society and politics are worth noting here. Thailand's modernization has been driven by economic and social change more than by commitments by political leaders to transform social institutions or to instigate wholesale cultural change. With the exception of Plaek Phibulsongkhram, Thai political leaders generally were quite conservative. Second, in part as a result, but also because Thailand never was formally colonized, Thailand experienced little sustained mass mobilization. These factors help to account, third, for the fact that only since Thaksin gained the premiership have the Thai masses been undergoing political inclusion. Fourth, the potency of the institution of monarchy, and in particular of King Bhumipol Adulyadej's reign, helped to sustain elements of enchantment underpinning Thailand's "dual regime." That regime features discordant conceptions of democracy and bases of democratic legitimacy. Finally, it is appropriate to note that Thailand can lay claim to having as rich an experience of democratic failures as can any other country. Each of these five factors is worth elucidating.

Modernizing ambitions burned more broadly among wider numbers of people and more intensely among some leaders in a number of countries in the past than they did in Thailand. In Japan, for example, the Meiji oligarchs oversaw fundamental transformations of almost all aspects of economy, society, and politics to create a country that could handle the threats posed by Western imperialism. Early in the twentieth century, Ataturk launched a comparably ambitious campaign in Turkey. Within a few years of taking power, he ended the Ottoman Caliphate, established the Turkish Republic, closed down religious organizations and schools, replaced the Arabic script with the Latin one and Arabic for Turkish in the call to prayer, banned "Islamic dress" and more (Mishra, 2012: 282). Leninists in Russia, China, and elsewhere instituted thoroughgoing modernization programs. In all of these cases, extensive reforms were aimed at ensuring national survival and enabling national power. By contrast, the remarkable reforms of late nineteenth century Thailand largely were limited to administrative, legal and logistical measures to centralize and consolidate rule, measures aimed at enabling Siam's and the monarchy's survival.

Modernity features impersonality, a reliance on neutral procedure to allocate values by rules rather than on the basis of inherited or other partiality. It is shaped by institutions, a main feature

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<sup>9</sup> This characterization seems to fit a neo-patrimonial polity better than one of the world's great economic successes. Nonetheless, it applies.

of which is their impersonality (Sanchez-Cuenca, 2003: 63). Weber described the complex of forces that enmesh us in modern societies as constituting an iron cage. This iron cage can be conceptualized as a Calvinist straightjacket (Gorski, 2003) that features “a penal conception of the self” (Khilnani, 2001: 19). It entails an “incessant hindsight and foresight” (Elias, 1969: 374). The embrace of modern “impersonalism” is a big step for the state on the way to becoming a “cold hard monster” (Nietzsche, in Fukuyama, 2011), a step Thais have been reluctant to take.

Thailand’s limited past social transformations helped to sustain social peace and elite consensus. With deepened political polarization after 2005, the long enduring, broad elite consensus shattered. Possibly long lived political cleavages emerged instead. The assumed strength of national identity came under challenge, as Red Shirts articulated oppositional, regionally based identities in the Northeast and North. The weaknesses of the Thai state grew more visible as political division rendered its security forces ineffectual and its system of justice increasingly suspect.<sup>10</sup> Less openly, the centrality of the monarchy in Thai society came under challenge. These factors worked together to threaten, at least temporarily, the long sustained dynamism of the Thai economy as a broad agenda of needed projects and reforms was neglected. Thai society and polity slipped their long accustomed moorings. Would they find new and secure ones any time soon?

Thailand’s escape from formal colonial control was critical in deferring significant levels of mass mobilization. Without need to mobilize resources in resistance to foreign control, Thai elites had no incentives to mobilize the masses. Hence, Thais had no historical experience or institutional inheritance associated with linkages between elites and masses. It is worth noting also that immigrant Chinese comprised Thailand’s bourgeoisie, the class that might otherwise have been the most dynamic agent supporting social and political change.

Third, Thailand’s limited experience of mass mobilization helps to explain the late political inclusion of the masses. All adult Thais have been voting since soon after Thais started doing any voting. Nonetheless, most rural Thais were without a civic or participatory conception of voting and often were swayed by gifts and by the voting suggestions offered by local influentials. No doubt background social changes had prepared the ground for him, but Thaksin’s prominent promises and delivery of popular policies helped to trigger mass inclusion.

Fourth, King Bhumipol rebuilt (for 17 years, Thailand had no resident king) the charisma of the institution of the monarchy and, in particular, his personal authority. While his forebears modernized the institution, downplaying notions of divinity, King Bhumipol’s reign embraced those once discarded elements (Jackson, 2010: 31-32). By the time the king intervened decisively to end political violence and authoritarian rule in 1973, he had established himself as the ultimate arbiter in Thai politics. Generally avoiding the open exercise of political authority, the king

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<sup>10</sup> The numbers of Thais indicating either a great deal or quite a lot of trust in the courts has fallen steadily over the three Asian Barometer waves: 73, to 69.3, to 63.1 per cent. Among those relatively few identifying with the *Pheu Thai* or Democrat Parties, the numbers in 2010-2011 were 39.6 and 80.4!

afforded the political system a form of reliable third party enforcement that gave to the overall system a considerable degree of stability, if rather little transparency.

The king, at least since the time of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat in the mid-twentieth century, largely monopolized the symbolic and ceremonial expressions of nationalism and served as the “soul” of the nation. The king’s centrality of course had important consequences. For example, it hobbled politicians seeking to construct any sort of national political following. At best, politicians could aspire to be prime ministers in the original sense of the term—the leading agent of His Majesty. The division of labor between king and prime ministers, far from ideal in terms of its effects on accountability, nonetheless left ample scope for ambitious politicians to compete to achieve wealth and status.

In the traditional view, the monarchy in Thailand is necessary to sustain a moral center. The palace bolstered “the moral element in the public discourse”(Mulder, 1985: 314) and this may to some extent have curbed excessive rapaciousness. The monarchy operated in a fashion similar to ideology. It was a sort of concretization of ideology, an overarching conceptual system that facilitated collective action (Hanson, 2010: 48-52). If Thais have not been prone to adhere to impersonal norms, or are not strongly drawn to serving public needs, they have been ready, in service to their king, to abide by their “personal” commitments to the king as the embodiment of national community.

Many Thais see, in fairly profound fashion, some people, and some leaders, as “good,” and others not (Young: 12-2-2013: 13). Institutionalized uncertainty means, among much else, the need to accept that leaders may not be good people. This need constitutes a formidable challenge, particularly where leaders’ foibles and worse contrast sharply with the king’s majesty. The challenge may well be insurmountable unless Thais have faith that the bounds of political competition are firmly circumscribed by rules. In consolidated democracies, citizens and the political opposition, when forced to co-exist with awful leaders, look forward to the next constitutionally sanctioned opportunity, including elections, to throw the bums out. Many Thais have yet to make such a procedural commitment. Some Thais who may have thought they were ready to make such a commitment may have decided, after Thaksin had been in power a few years, that they were not.

One Thai scholar contrasted the bases of “Thai-style democracy,” which accorded the monarchy a critical, albeit obscured, centrality in the political system, with those of “rule-based” Western models. The former, he suggested, was “founded on a cultural model of moral and king-centered politics” (Askew, 2010: 11). Another scholar argued for “a culturally Thai way of doing politics” that was rooted in a Thai culture that was incompatible with Western ideas about democracy (Hewison and Kitirianglarp, 2010: 181). As these examples suggest, a number of Thai intellectuals struggled to articulate bases on which Thais might perceive legitimacy in the hybrid Thai-style democracy with its twin but unequal bases of legitimacy comprising a sort of dual regime. Their emphasis on morality and on good people tended to be read by critics as archaic traditionalism or

class condescension. Of these there was more than a little. However, at the heart of these Thai ideas of compound legitimacy are assumptions of widespread amorality in the public sphere and the relative impotence of political institutions to impose a just and stable order in the absence of monarchy. The monarchy is arguably more central to traditional ideas of politics and political community in Theravada Buddhist societies than it ever was in European ones, perhaps also Confucian ones.

Finally, Thailand is something of a poster child for democracy as Sisyphean exercise. Since Thailand adopted its first constitution in 1932, it ran through them at a faster clip than any other country (Harding and Leyland, 2011: 34). Over that stretch Thailand has had far more constitutions than the United States has had presidents. We might say that Thailand had a revealed comparative advantage in constitution crafting. Particularly over the past two decades and more, even when Thais haven't been at work putting together new constitutions, they often have been amending them, or debating intensively whether and how to amend them.

Thailand also experienced more regime shifts (back and forth between authoritarian and democratic governments) than all but a very few countries (Boix, 2003: 89-109; Kapstein and Converse, 2008). Adam Przeworski and Fernando Limongi noted that authoritarian regimes have better chances of remaining authoritarian and democratic ones are more likely to remain democratic at higher income levels (Przeworski and Limongi, 1997). Their data suggested that above a \$6,055 per capita income in purchase power parity 1985 U.S. dollars, democracies are eternal. In other words, no democracy had ever failed above that income threshold. Argentina was the only example of democratic death at a per capita income above \$6,000, or above \$5,000, and only one other country, Uruguay, had experienced a democratic reversal at an income level above \$4,000. Going down still one more step, to per capita incomes of \$3,000, yielded only four additional countries. That makes six countries in total (Chile, Fiji, Greece, and Suriname in addition to Argentina and Uruguay) that had per capita incomes above \$3,000 when their democracies failed. Thailand's per capita income in 2014, measured in 1985 purchasing power parity dollars, was above \$4,000, suggesting that with its coup in 2014 Thailand joined rather select company (Argentina and Uruguay).<sup>11</sup>

### **Dynamics contributing to democratic breakdown**

Several dynamics that seem to have contributed to enfeebling Thailand's democracy or to the heightening of political tensions from 2005, or to both, are worth discussing here. They include weak commitments to impersonal procedure. Also important was the resuscitation of the military's political roles after the 2006 coup (discussed in the next section of the paper). The rise of mass street political movements and of new media also proved important. More generally, the poor quality of Thai public

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<sup>11</sup> A less than rigorous examination of later cases not considered by Przeworski and Limongi suggested other trailblazers, in particular Russia and Venezuela, though these cases did not feature overt (advertized) departures from democracy.

deliberations, evident even in print media, tended to make contested policy and political issues unnecessarily opaque. That opacity contributed to their potency. The effect was to sustain a taste for political poetry over prose that afforded ample scope for vilification, lies, hate speech, conspiracy mongering, and enchantment. Discussion turns to each of these factors in turn.

### *Impersonal procedure*

Many Thais seem to have distaste for the affect-free impersonality associated with commitment to procedures. This of course contributes to the weakness of rule of law. Until fairly recently and for most people, the law was "distant, incomprehensible, and generally available only to those who had the right connections and price" (McVey, 2000: 8). Rather than viewing their social milieu as one governed effectively by impersonal norms, most Thais looked to personal connections to afford them influence and protect them from calamity. Where the powerful enjoy considerable discretion enforcing rules, establishing bonds with the right patron can be an effective means of reducing risks (Kitschelt and Wilkinson, 2007: 10). In Thailand, insecurity and a resulting desire for protection was pervasive (Day, 2002: 18-19). One scholar described Thais' "basic drive" as being the establishment of an "extensive network of personal relationships" (Wichiarajote: 27-60).

Objective measures of rule of law in Thailand, such as those of the World Justice Project (WJP), do not depict a terribly weak system, but one that is situated closer to Nigeria than to Norway. Illegal behaviors are widespread, prosecutors, and in particular politicians and the police, are very corrupt, but courts less so. The WJP rated 97 countries on a wide variety of measures relating to the rule of law. They reported rankings on eight dimensions. Thailand fared best among these dimensions on the effectiveness of its criminal justice system (35) and fundamental rights (38). Its corruption ranking slipped sharply from the prior WJP report (28 of 66), falling to 65 of 97 in 2012. Among other upper middle income countries, its corruption ranking was 24<sup>th</sup> of 30; among other East Asian countries, 11<sup>th</sup> of 14 (Agrast et al. 2013: 143).

Asia Barometer asked respondents if, in a tough situation, it was acceptable for the government to ignore laws and almost half of Thai respondents said it was. Among Asian countries, only in Mongolia and Singapore did more respondents take that view. When asked to react to the statement that the government treats all citizens equally, 19.1 per cent of Thai respondents strongly agreed, more than in any of the other Asian countries. Asian Barometer data from 2001-2003, reported far higher levels of trust in the courts in Thailand than in the Philippines, Taiwan or South Korea. By 2010-2011, its lower level of trust was still well above that in Taiwan, but not much more than ten per cent above that in Indonesia and almost 20 per cent above the figure for the Philippines.

Thailand's justice system is of great concern, despite Thais' confidence in it, for three reasons. First, because Thais' confidence is misplaced! Second, because the justice system's legitimacy in the past was tied to some degree to the monarchy and may come under increasing threat as that institution's potency declines. Third, because the 2007 constitution saddled the courts with heavy responsibilities in policing political competition. Partly as a result, Thais confidence in the courts declined. Asian



Barometer data reported a drop of almost 13 per cent in the number of Thais expressing confidence in the courts between 2006 and 2010 (Chang, Chu, and Diamond, 2012).

Thaksin's political opponents exposed the judiciary to greater political risks in hopes of being able to constrain his political power. This same motivation led to knocking at the barracks, eventually successfully, leading to the 2006 coup. With the military in power for over a year and succeeding governments intent on wooing it, military influence grew decisively. Military budgets expanded and the military (or Thaksin) created a variety of exceptions to the rule of law. The 2008 Internal Security Act granted the military extraordinary emergency powers, complementing an already bountiful array of oppressive legal instruments. Thailand's "three different regimes of exception" pushed toward "making the rule of law an exception" (Harding and Leyland, 2011: 118).

#### *Street politics and new media*

Nancy Bermeo argued that democracy is most frequently destabilized when groups in civil society develop into social movements, particularly when those movements merge, even if only at topmost levels (Bermeo, 2003: 229). Thailand's mass street politics may not deserve the label "social movements." They tend to be heavily dependent on mobilization from above. They generally are not constituted from previously existing social groups, although there certainly were elements of this in the UDD and the PDRC (professionals, doctors in particular). In contexts of political polarization and paralysis in which political institutions are unable to broker compromise, mass organizations assume greater importance with potentially destabilizing effects on democracy (Bermeo, 2003: 166).

When street opposition to Thaksin began to grow late in 2005, Opposition leader Abhisit appealed to the prime minister to allow a censure motion as a means of bringing the political debate back into Parliament. The Opposition, short of 25 per cent of the seats in Parliament, could not compel the move. Thaksin, instead, sought a new electoral mandate, and dissolved Parliament. The Democrats and other opposition parties boycotted the election, producing a failed election. Thaksin was overthrown by a coup before new elections could be held.

Since that time, street politics quickly established a featured place in Thai politics. Threats to unleash new rounds of street politics now are used to nudge decisions in Parliament. For example, the huge PDRC turnouts on the streets late in 2013 quickly decided Prime Minister Yingluck's government to reverse plans to amend the constitution and to push through an amnesty bill. In 2010, Opposition leader Chalerm Yumbamrung put off a no-confidence motion he had planned to launch to avoid distracting attention from what he described as the more critical street demonstrations then ongoing that also aimed at bringing down the government. In 2012, the Democrat Party employed disruption in Parliament while its allies on the street blocked MPs' access to Parliament, all in efforts to prevent amendments to the 2007 constitution. In 2013, the Democrats, long having kept aloof from street politics, launched their own street rally. The following year, they again boycotted elections, this time to lend support to a street-based opposition movement.

In “high-civic-literacy societies”, institutions contribute to and reinforce civic competence so that most “citizens have meaningful maps to guide them through the complexity of decisions that their community will face” (Milner, 2002: 189). In contrast, Thai citizens often are not well informed about public concerns. They tend to employ simple, stylized cognitive maps that serve only crudely as guides to the decisions their communities confront. Thais relied overwhelmingly on government-provided television news. Pierre Bourdieu worried that television had a “de facto monopoly on what goes into the heads of a significant part of the [French] population.” Television tended to focus on “that which is most obvious, meaning individuals.” It aroused “the unbridled constructions of demagoguery...by catering to the most primitive drives” (Bourdieu, 1998: 2, 18, 52). Not only do more people in Thailand than in France rely overwhelmingly for their news on television, but the quality of reporting in Thailand is surely lower.

Sondhi Limthongkul introduced in 2005 highly partisan round-the-clock television news “reporting” from ASTV. Other stations such as Voice TV and Blue Sky later followed. These stations provided an alternative to government views on television. They also afforded ample opportunities for the sort of brain washing associated with total immersion within cult-created environments. Many Thais succumbed to these immersion experiences. They brought to mind Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk’s character telling the teacher he had come to kill, because the teacher required girls to remove their headscarves, “I listen to Flag Radio all day long (Pamuk, 2004: 41).” It was clear by 2005 that control over information had emerged in Thailand as a key front—an information war—in competition among political parties and street movements.

Community radio was another critical information resource, deployed largely by Thaksin’s supporters. The Democrat Party-led coalition government that came to power at the end of 2008 gave much attention to community radio stations as it tried to demobilize opposition and to quell speech that promoted hatred and incited violence. Community radio developed into a highly diverse movement and some stations featured a pronounced rough neck style of politics.

### *Deliberations*

While Thais now have more diverse sources of information, they have not made progress toward public deliberations. “Public reason is characteristic of a democratic people.” The “values of public reason...[constitute] the guidelines for public inquiry” (Rawls, 2005: 212, 224). If higher quality deliberations (those that are more inclusive and consequential) are associated with higher quality democracies (Dryzek, 2008), this indicator does not reflect well on Thailand’s version of democracy.

Thai deliberations suffer from a number of causes. Most Thais have inadequate access to quality information, status tends to trump arguments, and the state regulates information flows aggressively. Many political groups and individuals are intolerant, not disposed to give a hearing to opposed arguments, and prone to try to intimidate opponents. Most individuals, however, shied away from open or sharp disagreements on political issues in face-to-face contexts. Relative to the rest past, however, Thais were more ready to confront one another in groups, often by shouting at one another.

If Thai political discussions tend not to be deliberative, they are at least in one sense inclusive. They frequently extend beyond the profane realm to encompass elements of the other worldly. Appeals to spirits and other actors that inhabit Thailand's enchanted political spaces, however, tend to inhibit the strengthening of political accountability or of deliberative capacities.

Public speech also often features hate and violence. The media reflects an apparent Thai taste for sanguinary spectacle. It gave considerable play to the UDD's splashing of buckets of blood on Parliament and the prime minister's front gate in 2010. UDD protesters displayed grisly images on posters and CDs (Streckfuss, 2012: 275). An editorial in *The Nation* argued that the Thai public has a high tolerance for hate media (*The Nation*, May 3, 2010: 12A). One scholar tracking Facebook discussions found many messages "provoking people to hate each other" (Rakaseri et al., *The Nation*, May 8, 2010: 2A). A column in *The Nation* suggested that Thais were seeing something new as emotion and hatred grew pervasive in new partisan media. These media not only were criticizing the government and using disinformation to do so, but issuing calls to kill the prime minister (Chongkittavorn, *The Nation*, May 10, 2010: 13A).

The stages of Red Shirt rallies featured disturbingly violent rhetoric and incitement. Jatuporn Prompan, MP and a Red Shirt leader, called out from the stage "There will be blood on the street if the government does not call off the dispersal operations. Our patience is running out. We will take more serious measures to retaliate. The dark sky will turn red, red like blood" (Human Rights Watch, 2011). An actor turned activist called on his audience in Chiang Mai to bring gasoline tanks to burn down Bangkok (parts of Bangkok were duly torched). Another of the key Red Shirt leaders, subsequently a deputy minister in the next government, was speaking from the UDD stage when he bellowed "Send in your army divisions...and kill the people, there will be blood everywhere...the nation will rise up. Bring it on! Come on! Come on!" (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2011). Even before much of this agitation for violence had become familiar, a Bangkok University Poll found, when it asked respondents whether or not it would be possible for the authorities to stop the Red Shirt rally from becoming violent, that 61 per cent did not believe it would be (*The Nation*, March 13, 2010: 4). These Thais embraced Shakespeare's assumption that "So foul a sky clears not without a storm."

Almost two years later, similarly sanguinary impulses were still readily found. Thaksin's opponents responded hysterically when one university-based group called openly for reform of the lese-majeste law. Online commentary was ugly, with people calling for members of the group to be thrown from helicopters, burned alive, or beheaded and their heads mounted on stakes at the entrance of Thammasat University (Chachavalpongpun, 2011). After a couple of punks ambushed the group's leader and beat him up, much online commentary was laudatory. One newspaper story reported these comments: "They shouldn't have punched him, they should have shot him in the mouth"; "I hate violence, but I extremely like this"; "Don't call them villains, the two attackers are good citizens. Their good deed will be remembered forever" (Samabuddhi, *Bangkok Post*, March 1, 2012: 1). Are Thai audiences perhaps simply not yet acclimated to propaganda and invocations to hate? Stefan Zweig wrote 20 years later of the "unsuspicious

generation” in Europe for whom propaganda had not yet “worn itself thin.” As a result, the “Hymn of Hate” was a smash hit in German classrooms, mass media, and on lecture stages on the eve of the Great War (Zweig, 1943: 232-235).

The aggressive loudmouth slinging violent threats seems to be a reasonably attractive Thai cultural type, at least in some contexts. However, over the past century, only in 1976 did a mob indulge in extensive violence and in that case it was fomented by the security services. Neither has Thailand had political terrorists engaged in extensive mayhem. Even in the Deep South, which does have extensive political violence, the victims of terror generally are not anonymous. Thailand’s loudmouths are preferable, if we must choose, to more discreet, explosive-bearing terrorists.

### **Consequences of democratic breakdown**

Many of the long familiar signposts of Thai politics have shifted. Elite unity collapsed, mass mobilization rose sharply, and marked and disabling political polarization emerged. Street politics grew dramatically in frequency and impact. Parliament’s influence declined. The end of the prior century may have marked Parliament’s “high water mark”. The Democrat Party-led government of 1997-2000 passed some 300 bills, many of them major organic bills necessary for the realization of the 1997 constitution, as well as economic legislation relating to the 1997 economic collapse (Harding and Leyland, 2011: 68). This liberal apogee was followed immediately by a rising democratic trend when Thaksin took office and began to make rural Thais believe the electoral process was meaningful. Now that democracy has been overturned again, what consequences will follow?

Past coups have had, in some senses, limited consequences. The limits of those consequences no doubt became a cause of subsequent breakdowns. The limited consequences are clearest for the military itself. Coups have not damaged the military’s interests. Only in 1992, after the military tried to dominate the elected government (its party led the resulting coalition), was there a public backlash that resulted, until Thaksin took power a decade later, in curbing of the military’s political activity. Ironically, in his bid to cement his control over every source of power in Thailand, Thaksin helped to reverse that trend. If Thaksin reversed it, however, it was his opponents who took the lead thereafter in knocking at the barracks.

Coups generally have not been particularly repressive, so that citizens have not suffered great direct negative consequences. Governments installed by military governments in 1991 and again in 2006 were more responsive to environmental and other NGO concerns than have been most elected governments. Coups have not faced concerted campaigns of protest or more violent forms of opposition. For the generals contemplating the 2006 and 2014 coups, concerns about international reactions probably constituted the most formidable obstacle to going forward. In the run-up to the latest coup, there was much talk of a violent response by Red Shirts, of the arms

they were bringing in from Cambodia and secreting away. Generally, these claims could be dismissed as examples of the hyperventilating rhetoric that characterized so much discussion of Thailand's politics on the street, on television, and in cyber-space, both in Thailand and abroad.

The military has proceeded carefully and methodically following the coup in 2014. Do they know what they are doing? Could their effort to "reset" Thai politics produce a cooling off period during which passions might fade and more dispassionate voices come to the fore? Or is repression simply allowing anger to fester, ambitions for revenge to simmer? Are the military's uses of propaganda, including musical performances aiming to win hearts and minds, hopelessly anachronistic? I cannot say flatly that these strategies will not work as the military hopes they will. The leadership was clever in using the rice scheme fiasco to its advantage by immediately arranging for long overdue payments to rice farmers. It thereby won considerable initial good will. Most Thais seem to be relieved to take a break from contention and violence. However, the internet denies the military the information monopoly they may need to make their approach successful. A broad network of intellectuals and activists works to sustain a critical perspective. Thaksin likely has a vindictive streak and still has a massive fortune to deploy. His family and their assets in Thailand, however, serve as hostages.

As absurd as it seems, one of the most promising means of securing a more hopeful democratic future in Thailand would be to remove Thaksin from the equation. Perhaps a large enough payment would make that possible, but such an agreement would have to be guaranteed in some fashion. With Thaksin and his money gone, his political party would likely fracture. Mobilization of former Thaksin supporters would continue, at least to some degree, and populism likely would remain a central element in political competition at least until income gaps moderated.

Removing Thaksin from Thai politics would not have a major impact on corruption, the rule of law, the quality of public deliberations or most other topics discussed above. It would, however, remove anxiety about a possible loss of political pluralism. No other actor has comparable capacity and ambition to exercise prolonged and illiberal rule over the country. It is possible to argue, however, that the PDRC's capacity to turn out so many Thais on the street late in 2013 demonstrated a capacity to mobilize effective opposition to any bids Thaksin might make to entrench his political power.

Issues of political pluralism to the side, Thaksin is a more divisive figure than any other Thai politician because of the widespread belief, mostly among his opponents, that he did not show the king appropriate respect. A far less predictable means of defusing some of Thailand's political tensions would be to complete royal succession. It is impossible to know what impact that change will have, but anxiety on that score has long been a prominent feature of Thai political life and was cited widely as contributing to political tensions before the coup. Even if there is no uncertainty as to who will succeed, anxiety will tend to remain high until it becomes a fact.

If the generals continue to enjoy a relatively good coup but do not find means of sidelining Thaksin, how will his next political vehicle fare? Thaksin has enough money to be able to continue to recruit large numbers of electable politicians. Will he continue to exercise a powerful draw on voters, particularly in the North and Northeast? How mutable are Thai partisan (i.e. personal) attachments? As the man who convinced millions to award their votes to him rather than to whoever paid for the votes, Thaksin may well enjoy extensive voter loyalty for years to come.

If somehow Thaksin were to return, or even if he does not, his hold over Thai politics could prove as durable as was Peron's in Argentina, lasting over two decades though mostly from exile. The "iron law of Argentine politics" was that in free elections the Peronists always won and in government they did not respect minority rights. Peron's supporters backed their man impervious to his flaws: "even if a thief we want Peron" (Maravall, 2003: 271). Peron was "an extraordinary pole of attraction and repulsion in Argentine politics...able to create and sustain a semi-fascist, populist-nationalist rhetoric" (from Linz and Stepan, 1996: 196-202).

Some leaders, or groups of leaders, or, conceivably, some broad sets of shared interests, need to emerge to create more than one political party able to win large numbers of votes. Not only Thaksin's future as leader of such a party is in doubt. So too is that of the Democrat Party. The Democrat Party was founded at the dawn of competitive party politics in 1946. It is the only surviving party from that era. It is the only party that has been willing often to serve as an Opposition. It is the only one to have (some) meaningful branches. It is the only party in the last 25 years, other than Thaksin's *Thai Rak Thai*, to govern effectively. It is the only one not entirely controlled by one or a small number of leaders. And it may be in trouble. When party leader Abhisit tried to encourage talks in May between Thaksin supporters and opponents, in hopes of finding a way out of the political deadlock, he lost a great deal of support from among Thaksin's opponents. He may have sacrificed his ability to lead the party. Someone needs to lead it beyond its too narrow Bangkok-and-the-South base.

If we look, in rather un-Thai fashion, beyond the personalities at the heart of Thailand's political conflict, what more can we expect as consequences of the coup? The next constitution will be even more "post-political" than was the last. More steps will be adopted to curb the powers of elected leaders. These likely will include an unelected or, as in 2007, an only half-elected Senate. There will be more fiddling, perhaps including a larger element of proportional voting, with the electoral system. Some of the powers of the courts and accountability institutions might be pared back, however. The Supreme Court's special political court may be dropped altogether and the Constitutional Court's powers might be rolled back slightly. One major uncertainty is what the impact will be for political decentralization and local politics. On both sides of the political divide, many voices articulated support for political decentralization. However, while the anti-Thaksin forces view decentralization as a possible strategy for reducing the resources that come under the control of elected politicians at the national level, they also worry about extensive corruption at the local level.

The damage to Thai democracy may be coming not just from the latest coup or the high levels of polarization, but also from the considerable successes achieved by the strategy of getting people out on the street in large numbers for long periods of time. The potency of street politics is alarming. Will Parliament be able to reclaim some of its former political centrality?

Thai democracy has already suffered, as a result of the latest coup, the damage caused by lack of democratic continuity, by the suspension of learning democracy by doing it. Given the qualities of Thailand's democracy, perhaps those losses are not too great. Perhaps there will be an opportunity to make the most of a new founding of Thailand's democracy. It is hard to see, however, how the circumstances could be any more favorable than they were in 1997. That constitution lasted less than a decade. It succeeded in creating a strong and vertically accountable (to voters, anyway) government that shredded most of its, admittedly somewhat quixotic, liberal institutions.-

### **Thailand's democratic prospects**

Thailand has moved from being a poor to an upper middle income country very rapidly, enjoying social and policy stability along much of the way. It was less impressive in its political performance. Its past successes and shortcomings resulted in significant part from its highly limited levels of political participation. Future political gains, and in some respects economic ones as well, depend on Thailand successfully adapting its political and social institutions to mass demands for political inclusion and rising levels of political participation.

Mass political inclusion will be a central theme of Thailand's politics over the coming generation. Just how that process unfolds will be important. The process might play out in distinct ways and those differences could have a great impact on Thailand's political evolution. Thailand likely is at a critical juncture, a time during which the choices Thais make could have disproportionate impact on the country's future political course. For the short term, however, Thailand's possibilities seem to be limited to some form of electoral authoritarian populist regime or "network monarchy" (McCargo, 2005), continuation, in modified forms, of existing political bargains and institutions.

Thais probably do not have what it takes to be able to do fuller versions of democracy soon. Political institutions are too weak, civil society groups too brittle and dependent on particular leaders, broadly held values too authoritarian and intolerant, and discursive practices are not oriented toward political deliberations. Accordingly Thailand will not entrench a fuller liberal democracy soon. Thai society is likely to remain too hierarchical and the rule of law too weak to make that possible. In fact, Asian Barometer data does not even suggest that attitudinal change in Thailand has been moving in directions more supportive of democracy. Support for liberal democratic values is low, generalized support for democracy fell sharply from 2006 to 2010, and resistance to strong man or military rule declined. Along with Mongolia and the Philippines, Thailand seemed to have many "disoriented and confused citizens whose inconsistent political orientations" offered only "fragile and fluid foundations of democratic legitimation (Chang, Chu, and Diamond, 2012)."

However, Thailand also is not likely to revert to bureaucratic or military dominance.<sup>12</sup> Thais are growing more urban and educated. Hierarchical values that foster deference to high ranking state officials are under challenge. The military rarely is highly unified and neither is it well insulated from society. Its corporate identity is not particularly pronounced. Young talent in Thailand is no longer drawn as powerfully to careers in the military or civil service as in the past and ongoing rapid wealth creation continues to make society more complex and diverse. Finally, military and other bureaucratic elites in the future will be decreasingly able to draw on the well of monarchical charismatic authority to bolster their own influence.

So the two political regime types that remain seem by default most likely to dominate Thai politics over coming years are authoritarian populism and some form of elite pluralism refereed by a vastly weakened monarchy. In either outcome, elections would continue to be important. On the whole, Thais' commitment to government of rules, rather than of men, remains fragile. Thailand therefore will continue to rely on either a non-elected referee presiding over political competition among different groups, or an elected political leader able to dominate the political system as Thaksin was able to do.

In essence, a purer form of balance of power politics in Thailand will not be sustainable. Games of fairly pure power competition, but underpinned by commitments to abide by impersonal procedures, will have to be moderated by and embedded within some more personalized and accessible social understandings. While in some contexts such social understandings might be comprised of commitments to rule of law, independence of the judiciary, and norms of restraint and tolerance, such an understanding seems unlikely to be sufficiently potent in the Thai context any time soon. Instead, the social glue is going to have to be provided by some sort of overlord. The monarchy might continue to play such a role,<sup>13</sup> combining elements of a referee regulating battle among competing political groups and a source of semi-institutionalized charismatic authority. However weak future monarchs will be relative to King Bhumipol, they will be able to draw on vast material, institutional (Ockey, 2005), and symbolic sources of power and authority. It might suit the needs of competing political elites to draw on the institution's charisma to sanction bargains they make among themselves. Such a regime might bear some resemblance to British ones of the eighteenth century with, however, much less well developed rule of law. In short, Thais are most likely to end up with some elements of an "Asian model" offering the "fatal temptation" of social unity "without politics" (Buruma, 2013).

The most plausible alternative to what would amount in some respects to comparatively modest changes in the political regime that has operated in Thailand over the past few decades would be a situation in which Thaksin, or a similarly dominant political figure, concentrated power in one set of hands in an electorally based regime. Such an arrangement might be more stable if the leader's dominance was less pronounced than was Thaksin's (Przeworski, 2003: 115) and if the

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<sup>12</sup> Admittedly, the military's current success is worrisome. Might the threats it perceives work together with growing military ambitions to stymie Thai democracy for a longer period, as it did in Uruguay in 1973 (Bermeo, 2003: 134)?

<sup>13</sup> Could he? Might his successor?



leader was more conciliatory and diplomatic. Such rule would be easier to maintain if the leader were successful in centralizing rents effectively to use in making side payments. The last possibility would be undermined should decentralization advance further in Thailand. In its purest form, such a regime would not have to contend with the monarchy as a base of political power. Hence, this outcome becomes more likely to the extent that the monarchy occupies less symbolic space, opening the way for political leaders to exploit symbolic appeals, including nationalism, in building electoral support bases. Thailand's sharp income inequality also will continue to make populist appeals effective in elections for some time to come.

The numbers of poor, undereducated, rural Thais will continue to decline fairly sharply over coming years. Education beyond primary levels has grown sharply over the past two decades. The share of the rural population that depends primarily on agriculture also has been falling and will continue to do so. Indeed the share of the non-urban population that is truly rural has also been falling, as more Thais live in growing towns or work in multiple occupations that move them in and out of semi-urban settings (Samudavanija, 2002: 151; Kitiarsa, 2012). Thailand's abrupt demographic transition contributes to several of these trends. All of them, together with the weakening of traditional hierarchical values, suggest that Thailand's social dualism will diminish fairly rapidly. Those trends will contribute in the longer term to stronger potential for a reasonably attractive liberal democratic regime.

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