



A Comparative Survey of

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Thailand Country Report:

Public Opinion and Political Power in Thailand

(Second Wave of Asian Barometer Survey)

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Even overwhelming support for democracy among peoples of developing nations cannot guarantee democratic governments in the face of determined elites who have access to instruments of military power (Linz and Stepan, 2001). The military, after fifteen years of true democracy, overturned a democratically-elected government in Thailand on September 21, 2006, as in 1991, on the pretext of “corruption in government.” Whether “corruption” warranted such a drastic remedy has yet to be proved,¹ but what is clear is that Thai elites are still willing to sacrifice democracy when they find control of government slipping from their grasp. For the time being, they are willing to tolerate a ban on all political activities, including meetings of political parties, assemblies of more than five people, and restrictions on the news media – specifically bans on criticism of the regime and reporting on Thaksin's activities - all measures that far exceed actions for which the Thaksin regime was severely criticized. The bankroller for the so-called People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD), Sondhi Limtongkul, now argues that suppression of individual rights is acceptable in order to rid the government of all remaining vestiges of the Thaksin regime.

Before censorship of the media took effect, the coup was challenged by some academics formerly opposed to Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, even the opposition political party, Prajadhipat (Democrat), which had precipitated the political crisis by boycotting the April elections, but few were willing to oppose the coup directly, especially after it received blessings from the palace. Clearly, they had underestimated the mood of the military and the palace that combined to end the 15-year trajectory of democratic government.

¹ Much is always made of the distribution of money during elections. There is, however, no hard evidence that such practices change election outcomes.

Explanations of this turn of events remain complex. Within a year after a landslide election victory of Thaksin Shinawatra's Thai Rak Thai party in the 2005 elections,² significant fissures opened in the Thai political landscape. Thousands of Bangkokians gathered in Lumpini Park to listen to attacks on the government by Sondhi Limtongkul, a wealthy businessman who, after supporting Prime Minister Thaksin in previous elections, fell out with him over what are not clearly identified issues. Many Thais were enraged, however, when the Prime Minister sold shares of the huge Shin Corporation to a Singaporean firm. The company included the major satellite linkage in SE Asia and a large proportion of cell phone business in Thailand. Some Thais argued that these were national assets that could not be transferred to non-Thais legitimately. In addition, Thaksin paid no tax on the sale estimated at around \$2 billion, because of a law exempting capital gains from taxation when acquired by sales through the Securities Exchange of Thailand. On a routine basis, protests of as many as 100,000 people marched to demand Thaksin's resignation or replacement.

Thaksin had his own supporters located mostly in rural areas of the country and mobilized even larger crowds (as many as 200,000 in Bangkok) in his support. Eventually, in order to quell the continuous unrest, he dissolved Parliament and ordered a "snap" election knowing that his popularity in the countryside would give him a new mandate to govern. The opposition parties, however, refused to participate in the election and supported a move to encourage voters to mark ballots against any candidates. Because the election law (not the Constitution) required that any candidate must receive at least 20 percent of the eligible electorate when only one candidate runs unopposed, this

² A nationwide poll of 1546 respondents by the King Prajadhipok's Institute in April, 2006, indicated over 80 percent approval for the Thaksin Shinawatra government. This nationwide approval, however, diverged sharply from Bangkok and the southern provinces.

move was successful and, despite repeated by-elections, 14 seats remained unfilled. Although the Constitution of 1997 mandated seating of the Parliament within 30 days, political manipulation by the Election Commission (requiring that all seats be “validated”) and by the courts prevented such an outcome.

Commentators now recognize, as though for the first time, deep political cleavages in Thai society. They do not, however, often note the long history of this polarization or that it has always, in one dimension at least, represented conflicts between Bangkok and the rest of Thailand.³ Political dimensions of this division represent a resurrection of the “two democracies” thesis that essentially pits the politics of Bangkok against politics of the rural populations. Polls, taken in 2005 and 2006, indicated growing divisions between urban and rural populations on some of the most fundamental social and political dimensions. Post-coup reports on the financial situations faced by farmers in the Northeast underline growing tensions between rural areas and the Bangkok metropole since the current regime returned government to traditional dominance by Bangkok interests less concerned for adversities in the hinterland.

What are the sources of the differences between urban and rural society that also happen to have significant impacts on tolerance for democracy and democratic government? People living in rural areas live a significantly more precarious existence. Their livelihood is constantly threatened by nature and they are exposed to lack of personal security in a significantly more anarchic society. This leads to a greater dependence upon social networks for “getting by” in life and, as in almost any society, rural dwellers are significantly more communal, as well as being interested in the welfare of their neighbors (which can be either positive or negative, from some perspectives).

³ Pradit Ruangdit, No End to the Political Polarization, Bangkok Post, 02/02/2007.

This communalism in rural areas also leads to higher levels of trust in other citizens, as well as higher levels of trust in government.

Urban dwellers live in an environment where they are more autonomous, isolated, and individualistic, relishing the anonymity presented by urban life – all characteristics of what may be described as a “modernistic” culture. For these urbanites, individual independence from society and government leads to a greater interest in protections from government interference that scholars often associate with what are generally described as “civil liberties.” These divergences between urban and rural populations appear to have significant impacts on how democracy is viewed by individuals living in these two contexts, rural dwellers opting for security and urban dwellers for freedom. It is important to note, however, that virtually all societies celebrate rural culture so that it persists long after populations become urbanized.

In the Thai context, scholars have noted disparities in approaches to democracy based upon class or status, as well as urban-rural cleavages within society, but Anek Laothamatas (1996) suggests that the most fundamental cleavage operating in Thai democracy is the sharp differences in political cultures between Bangkok and the essentially rural hinterland. Thailand is a “tale of two democracies”: one, of sophisticated urban elites (with origins or current residency in Bangkok), the other rural, often isolated, parochial interests that view political activity, especially elections, as opportunities for personal gain in a Downsian sense (Downs, 1997). Among other differences between urban and rural constituencies is that (according to the “Bangkok” view):

Voting in farming areas is not guided by political principles, policy issues, or what is perceived to be in the national interest, all of which is (regarded as)

the only legitimate rationale for citizens casting their ballots in a democratic election. The ideal candidates for rural voters are those who visit them often, address their immediate grievances effectively, and bring numerous public works to their communities (202).

The ability of rural constituencies to acquire substantial political power in the parliament under conditions of electoral democracy often leads to doubts among members of the middle class, the upper class, the mass media, and even academics as to the efficacy of the democratic process. For these groups, “democracy turns out to be the rule of the corrupt and incompetent” (Laothamatas, 208). This puts them in a dilemma: although they oppose authoritarian rule in principle, they hold representatives from rural constituencies in contempt, regarding them as “parochial in outlook, boorish in manner, and too uneducated to be competent lawmakers or cabinet members” (Laothamatas, 208).

The problem is that urban, educated, cosmopolitan candidates, who are skilled policy experts, are often held in equal contempt by villagers. They are often regarded as being alien to rural electorates in terms of taste, culture, and outlook, who “fail to stay close to the voters in both a physical and cultural sense” (Laothamatas, 208). Veiled contempt for rural-dwellers by sophisticated Bangkok elites posed no problem under authoritarian regimes. Once democratic elections tipped the balance in favor of rural areas, however, significant gaps in perceptions of and commitments to democracy have developed.

These cleavages have, over the past decade, produced considerable political conflict that until recently seemed to be abating. Laothamatas argues that this

fundamental conflict cannot be resolved until the Bangkok middle class accepts alternative versions of democracy that make room for understandings and aspirations of rural voters, especially the need for the rural poor to draw benefits away from the center and distribute them toward rural areas. “Ideally, patron-client ties might be replaced by a more responsive and effective system of local government. On top of that, voters are to be convinced that principle or policy-oriented voting brings them greater benefits than what they may get from local patrons” (Laothamatas, 223).

There is growing evidence, also, that, while the Bangkok middle class opposes authoritarian forms of government that restrict individual freedoms and exercise a heavy hand over commerce, the uncertainty of changes in government, even by democratic processes, is often viewed as destabilizing the economic environment on which entrepreneurs depend. The possibility that government may be seized by politicians with “populist” agendas poses an even more direct threat to the interests of a class that stands significantly above the average voter in Thai elections. The traditional emphasis on the “middle class” (that characterizes Bangkok “culture”), as an engine of democracy appears to be declining in favor of a view that middle-class support for democracy exists primarily when it coincides with class interests in curbing the power of government. This means that one cannot expect middle-class enthusiasm for democracy when it poses conflicts with private interests of the middle class. This latter view is expressed both by Laothamatas (1996), who argues that the 1991 coup could not have been sustained except for support from the middle class, and Samudavanija (1998), who notes that the role of the middle class in Thailand, vis- a-vis democracy, has been “reactive rather than proactive” (156) and that its primary interest in democracy has been “to safeguard their

own freedom and the freedom of the market” (158). Similarly, the coup of 2006 is often conceived as a revolt of the Bangkok-middle-class against dominance of the government by populist politicians who gain their support from rural masses.

The recent political conflict in Thailand thus represents a resurrection of the “two democracies” identified by Anek Laothamatas (1996) that essentially pits the politics of Bangkok against the rural North, Northeast, and Central regions from which the majority party, Thai Rak Thai, drew its strength. Underlying this cleavage is a division rooted in the history of Thai politics, but only now becoming critical to social stability as a result of advancing democracy in the Thai nation. Until the development of democracy, Thai politics was dominated by Bangkok, even though Bangkok comprises only about 15 percent of the population of Thailand. As democracy began to take hold (with each voter in the rural areas counting as much as each voter in Bangkok), it was only a matter of time before political power would shift to the politics and priorities of rural Thailand. The conflict between Bangkok and the hinterland was long in building, but, once the structures of democracy were in place, it was not long before the rural 80 percent asserted their political strength to the alarm of Bangkok elites.

This contribution begins with a fundamental premise that meanings of democracy are diverse by Bangkok-non-Bangkok sectors in Thailand and examines diverse values within the Thai nation that contribute to equally diverse understandings. The explanations of these diversities require further analysis, but here are tentative elaborations of the factors associated with both Bangkok-non-Bangkok status cleavages that seem to mark the significantly different emphases in approaches to democracy, much as Laothamatas describes.

Structure of the Research⁴

The data for this analysis were obtained in probability samples of eligible voters in the Thai nation through polls conducted in 2001, 2002, 2005 and 2006.⁵ The sampling procedure employs a three-stage probability sample based upon clusters of legislative districts, voting units (precincts), followed by a systematic sampling of voters in the selected voting units. The sample included 50 of the 400 legislative districts, 100 voting units from across the 50 legislative districts, and 1500-2000 respondents from the 100 voting units. Roughly 1500-2000 respondents were drawn from populations of roughly 55,000.

This process produces true probability samples of the Thai voter-eligible electorate. It represents the very few probability-based samples of the Thai population for political and social attitudes. The study presents the data that characterize the Thai population across the kingdom in their attitudes toward a variety of political and cultural attitudes, indicating the level of attitudinal diversity in democratic values among the Thai people. Specifically, it examines the rural-urban cleavage and the two cultures represented by that cleavage for their impacts on the current Thai political scene.

The Metropole Versus the Countryside

The sources of both the 1991 and 2006 coups are rooted in fundamental cleavages between Bangkok and the hinterland. One source of these cleavages is that there are significant class differences between Bangkok and the rest of Thailand, as one might expect. Table 1 shows highly significant differences between respondents in the two

⁴ The author wishes to express appreciation for funding of these polls by the King Prajadhipok's Institute and the Chung Ching Kuo Foundation.

⁵ Eligible voters include all Thai citizens 18 years of age and older.

areas in both income and education. What is even more interesting for purposes of this analysis are the significant differences in how Thais view themselves. Table 2, for example, shows significant differences between these areas in two dimensions. The first being how much respondents consider themselves to be “villagers” (*chao ban*) as opposed to “urban” (*khon muang*) and how much they think of themselves as “traditional” (*mai thansammy*) as opposed to “modern” (*thansammy*). (See Appendix 1.)

Table 1: Rural-urban Disparities in Income, Education, and “Modern Orientation” (2006) ANOVA

	<u>Bangkok</u>	<u>Non-Bangkok</u>	<u>F</u>	<u>Sig. of F</u>
Mean Household Income (Monthly in Baht)	26,995	10142	168.19	.000
Mean Education*	3.08	2.09	62.42	.000
Mean of Subjective Orientation to “modernism” (Factor scores)	.561	-.059	66.61	.000

***Based upon a 10-point scale from 1=no education to 10=post-graduate degree**

When these subjective indicators are combined in a factor analysis with objective indicators, such as the type of music one prefers, the results show significant gaps in cultural orientations between Bangkok and the rest of Thailand. This variable, designated as “modernism,” helps to explain other orientations to society and politics. Specifically, it contributes significantly to an explanation of support for democracy (Table 2).

Table 2: Effects of Bangkok Location, Subjective Orientations to “Modernism,” and SES on Support for Democracy* (2005)
N=1705

Variable	Regression Coefficient	Beta	Value of t	Sig. of t
Bangkok Residency	-.427	-.078	-3.068	.002
Modernism	-.153	-.093	-3.485	.001
SES	.014	.008	.302	.763
R = .127		F-test = 9.296		Sig. of F = .000

*See Appendix 1

The regression equation in Table 2 includes not only the “modernistic” cultural orientation and a variable representing Bangkok versus the rest of Thailand, but also an indicator of socioeconomic status (SES). This latter is composed of factor scores of income, education, and occupational status – all loading on a single natural factor, with loadings in excess of .65. As the equation in Table 2 shows, SES becomes a non-contributor to an explanation of support for democracy (Appendix 1) when geographic location and cultural orientations of respondents are included. What is even more interesting and important, however, is the finding that, when controlling for both variables that are highly associated with Bangkok residence, Bangkok location remains strong, indicating an additional effect between SES and support for democracy produced by both Bangkok location and modernism.

In addition, it is important to note that the signs of both “modernism” and “Bangkok residency” are negative, that is, the more “modern” a person regards oneself, the less supportive of democracy one is likely to be. In addition, there is further evidence of the finding, duplicated over several years and polls, that Bangkok residents are more negative in their evaluations of democracy. Furthermore, this more negative orientation

persists despite controls for modern orientations and SES, both associated with Bangkok residency, indicating an impact of urban location independent of two demographic characteristics associated with urbanism.

Ambivalence in Support for Democracy

Whatever the "meaning" of democracy among Thais, data on support for democracy in the Thai electorate show a very high level of respondents expressing support for democratic processes and institutions. A poll taken as late as 2005 shows that over 92.8 percent of the electorate were satisfied with democracy and the way it works in Thailand. In addition, 93.9 percent said that democracy is always preferable to authoritarian forms of government and, in 2006, nearly 85 percent indicated confidence in the ability of democracy to solve problems of the nation. Using a ten-point scale evaluating democracy in Thailand, less than 1 percent of the sample agreed that democracy is "unsuitable for Thailand" and nearly 46 percent "want complete democracy now."

Thus, in a superficial way, Thais are highly supportive of the "idea" of democracy in virtually every dimension. The fact that 30.5 percent of the sample rated the economy as "bad" or "very bad" and only 30.8 percent rate it as "good" or "very good,"⁶ in the 2006 poll implies that the high level of commitment to democracy obtains in the midst of both objective and subjective economic difficulties, thereby reinforcing significance of the high level of democratic adherents.⁷

When forced to choose between democracy and economic development, however, the commitment to democracy appears somewhat ambivalent. 46.7 percent indicate a

⁶ The remaining respondents rated the economy as "so-so."

⁷ It is important to note that Thai optimism about the future is high. 66.6 percent of respondents believe that the economic situation of their family will be better in the near future; only 7.2 percent believe that it will be worse.

preference for economic development over democracy, while only 23.0 percent remain committed to democracy over economic development defined as “improving one’s standard of living.” The question, however, asks respondents to choose between an abstract concept (democracy) and a concrete improvement in one’s personal livelihood; therefore, one should take these responses with a grain of caution.

Data analysis even more sensitive to democratic orientations indicates a Thai public strongly supportive of democratic institutions. When asked about alternatives such as “replacing parliament with a strong leader,” “abolishing opposition parties,” or “letting the military run things,” respondents reject these alternatives by large margins. Among these alternatives to an elected parliament, support for military governance is quite low, with over 78 percent rejecting this alternative (Table 3).

Table 3: Percent of Respondents Accepting Alternatives to Democracy, 2006
N=1546

	<u>Non-Bangkok</u>	<u>Bangkok</u>	<u>Total</u>
<i>Opposition parties should be abolished</i>	18.6	27.5	19.6
<i>The military should come in to govern the country</i>	20.6	31.0	21.8
<i>We should replace parliament with a strong leader</i>	23.2	31.9	24.3

(Differences between Bangkok and non-Bangkok respondents significant at p<.01.)

There are significant differences between Bangkok and non-Bangkok populations, however, when it comes to support for these items. A majority of respondents in both areas are generally opposed to any of these alternatives, but there are significantly higher levels of support for authoritarian alternatives in Bangkok than in the rest of the nation (Table 3). Support for the coup of September 19, 2006, clearly has its seeds in the

metropole-hinterland divide. With control of the instruments of violence, an elite minority can easily overcome public opposition to an unconstitutional overthrow of a democratic regime. Reinforcing this finding is the fact that abolishing opposition parties has significantly higher support among the more highly educated and persons of higher socio-economic status, probably because parties are viewed as instruments for mobilizing the masses against elite dominance of the political arena.

When these attitudes are differentiated between Bangkok and non-Bangkok populations, it becomes clear that Bangkok residents are significantly more supportive of alternatives to democracy than those residing in the hinterland (Table 3). Bangkok residents are more likely to accept a “strong leader” over parliamentary government, one-party governance, and even military rule than are citizens who live outside the capital.

When attitudes toward civil liberties are examined, there is somewhat more ambiguity in the Thai population’s commitment to traditional, liberal democratic values. Table 4 shows that Thais are somewhat anxious about social instability. While generally supporting unconstrained freedom of speech, diversity of political and social views appears threatening (75.8 percent) and nearly half the respondents (45.5) are not prepared to tolerate minority viewpoints.

Table 4: Support for Liberal Democracy, 2006 (Percent Strongly Agree or Agree) N=1546

	<u>Non-Bangkok</u>	<u>Bangkok</u>	<u>Total</u>
<i>Diverse views will tend to* make society chaotic</i>	80.4	83.7	80.8
<i>Organization of groups**</i>			

<i>disrupt harmony in society</i>	86.7	88.1	86.9
<i>The government should decide** whether certain ideas can be discussed in society</i>	47.4	54.0	48.2
<i>When a country is facing a difficult** situation, it is OK for the government to disregard the law in order to deal with the situation</i>	58.9	61.1	59.3

Differences between Bangkok and non-Bangkok respondents significant: *p<.05;
**p<.01

Bangkok residents, in 2006, are significantly less supportive of diversity and freedoms generally associated with civil liberties than in the past. They are more likely to be sympathetic with constraints on civil liberties, particularly during times of national emergencies. These views represent significant changes in attitudes of the Bangkok population in the face of a growing crisis. It should be noted, however, that these views may reflect a general anxiety among Bangkok residents with regard to the constant unrest posed by anti-Thaksin movements and the crisis of the April elections, also dominating the scene during the time this poll was taken.

Table 5: Differences in Thai Cultural Values* Between Bangkok and the Hinterland N=1546 (ANOVA Analysis)

<u>Variables</u>	<u>Non-Bangkok</u>	<u>Bangkok</u>	<u>F-test</u>	<u>Sig. of F</u>
Family values	-.0513781	.4237916	33.944	.000
Conflict resolution	.0438828	-.3619662	24.614	.000
Conflict avoidance	.0342083	-.2821671	14.864	.000

*Poll taken in 2003.

A poll taken in 2002-3 shows that Bangkok differs significantly from the rest of Thailand in values traditionally associated with Asian cultures (See Appendix 2). The questions load on three independent factors representing various dimensions of cultural orientations associated with family values, ways of resolving conflicts, and strategies of conflict avoidance. Ironically, Bangkok respondents score higher on the “family values” scale than does the rest of Thailand, but it is important to note that these values represent greater acceptance of authority and even what some observers might consider corruption – in this case nepotism.⁸ In terms of conflict resolution and conflict avoidance, Bangkok respondents are less inclined to accept traditional methods of conflict resolution which, in both measures, represent more communal and less individualistic approaches to dealing with conflict in everyday life (Table 5).

Table 6: Sources of Support for Democracy in Thai Cultural Values* N=1388

<u>Variables</u>	<u>Regression Coefficient</u>	<u>Standardized Coefficient</u>	<u>t-test</u>	<u>Sig. of t</u>
Family values	.148	.051	1.82	.069
Conflict resolution	.220	.078	2.63	.009
Conflict avoidance	.233	.082	2.92	.004
BKK-non-BKK location	-.197	-.086	-2.68	.007
SES	-.203	-.072	-2.19	.029
Constant	.409		2.81	.005
R = .208	F-test = 11.199	Sig. of F = .000		

***Poll taken in 2003 (two-tailed test).**

Table 6 shows that all three dimensions of cultural values contribute significantly

⁸ Polls taken in 2001 and 2005 indicate that Bangkokians have a significantly higher tolerance for corruption than does the rest of the country. (See Albritton and Bureekul, 2005.)

to support for democracy in the Thai context. Each of the dimensions – orientations to family, methods of conflict resolution, and a propensity for conflict toleration – all contribute independently to support for democracy in a positive direction. In the Thai case, more traditional orientations to these values appear to support democracy in different ways. Of the three dimensions, orientations to conflict resolution is the strongest of the three, underlining the concept of democracy as a means of resolving differences in society without resort to violence.

The strongest variable, however, is the measure of Bangkok-non-Bangkok location of respondents. Contrary to popular wisdom holding that Bangkok residents are more supportive of democracy, again the finding is that residents of Bangkok tend to be less supportive of the idea of democracy than their rural counterparts. When SES (socioeconomic status) is added to the equation, it also works in a negative direction, but with less impact than two of the three cultural values variables.

When the focus shifts to what we might call “liberal” democratic orientations, primarily the rule of law, results are reversed (See Appendix 1). Table 7 shows that the higher the values of a respondent on any of the three dimensions, the less likely that person is to adhere to the priority of the rule of law and process over political processes. Correspondingly, support for these values is associated with a Bangkok orientation, rather than a rural one. The complexity of this conundrum enhances the concept of widely differing views of democracy between urban and rural Thais. In addition, the role of these attitudes comes forward in that Thai traditional society, while enthusiastically supporting the “idea” of democracy, is not committed to notions of the values of liberal democracy that are regarded as key to a democratic society. In other words, there appear

to be fundamentally different views of what scholars call “democracy” between Bangkok and non-Bangkok societies, as Laothamatas suggests.

Table 7: Sources of Support for Rule of Law* N=1319

<u>Variables</u>	<u>Regression Coefficient</u>	<u>Standardized Coefficient</u>	<u>t-test</u>	<u>Sig. of t</u>
Family values	-.207	-.054	-2.05	.040
Conflict resolution	-.518	-.135	-4.93	.000
Conflict avoidance	-.724	-.189	-7.28	.000
Bangkok-non-Bkk location	.730	.242	7.96	.000
SES	-.010	.003	-0.84	.933
Constant	16.098		87.76	.000
R = .309	F-test = 27.655	Sig. of F = .000		

Poll taken in 2003; two-tailed test

Perhaps the most significant test of the "two-democracies" thesis lies in a comparison of the values voters apply in arriving at the voting decision. The 2005 poll includes questions measuring how important candidate criteria are for voters. When a factor analysis is applied to these criteria, the data fall into three distinct dimensions (Appendix 3). The first factor includes items indicating perceptions of the ability and capability of a candidate; the second factor includes items representing a highly localistic interest; and the third factor includes items indicating a reliance on personal characteristics of the candidates in the voting choice.

Table 8: Respondent Evaluations of Candidate Characteristics, An ANOVA Analysis N = 1937

	<u>Candidate Characteristics</u>		
	<u>Capability</u>	<u>Localism</u>	<u>Personalism</u>
<i>Bangkok</i>	.1500	-.8814	-.5694

<i>Remainder of Thailand</i>	-0.154	.0905	.0585
<i>F-Value</i>	4.516	169.341	67.264
<i>Sig. of F</i>	.034	.000	.000

The data in Table 8 show highly significant differences between Bangkok and the rest of Thailand in what is important about political candidates to residents in the respective sectors. Bangkok residents are more attracted to impressions of expertise and ability than are residents of the hinterland. In contrast, Bangkok respondents are strongly negative about "localistic" orientations, as well as reliance on personal traits that include "personality" and "good financial status." The data thus support Laothamatas' view that Bangkok residents see democracy as a means of producing political and policy experts, while rural areas are much more attracted to candidates who can produce benefits for the local community in a "pork-barrel" sense. Whether tensions between these two views of what electoral democracy is all about can ever be resolved is clearly a continuing challenge for democracy in Thailand.

Disillusionment with Democracy

A growing disillusionment with democracy, arguably associated with these highly divergent views of what democracy is all about, seemed to seize Bangkok elites in the months leading up to the coup. Signs of lessening affection for democratic government appeared in polls at the time of parliamentary elections in 2005, and, in 2006, at the time of the Senate elections and the abortive House elections in April. Much of the decline in support for democracy was associated with differences between Bangkok and the hinterland. For example, one item in the 2006 poll asked how respondents would describe the present political situation in Thailand. 32.3 percent of non-Bangkok respondents

answered “Good” or “Very Good,” while residents of Bangkok responded only 20 percent in those categories.

Answers to two other questions were shaped by the conflict. The first asked whether respondents agreed or disagreed with the statement: “Conflict among political groups is not a bad thing for our country.” 58.6 percent of Bangkok respondents agreed, but only 47.4 percent of the sample outside Bangkok could accept the idea of political conflict which, by this time, was endemic in Bangkok. An authoritarian view also emerges in responses to the question: “It is better to live in an orderly society than to allow people so much freedom that it can disrupt our stability and development,” and support for military intervention by Bangkok and non-Bangkok respondents reveals growing support for a coup (Table 9).

Table 9: Cleavages between Rural and Urban Populations in 2005 Polls, ANOVA Analysis

Indicators	N	Mean		F-Value	Sig. of F
		Bangkok	Non-BKK		
It is better to live in an orderly society than to allow people so much freedom that it disrupts development.	1985	7.86	7.26	8.952	.003
Even if a government is democratically elected, if it is corrupt, the military should come in to set things right.	1980	5.92	6.18	1.211	.271

Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree; 10 = Strongly Agree

There are two features of responses to these questions that bear mentioning. First, the overall mean of Thai respondents on a ten-point scale from 1-Strongly Disagree to 10-Strongly Agree is in excess of 7.0, implying that Thais have little tolerance for social

disorder even when it is associated with freedom of expression. In addition, the mean for Bangkok respondents is 7.86, while respondents from the rest of Thailand accepted such a notion at a lower level of 7.28.

One of the most interesting responses was to a statement: “Even if a government is democratically elected, if it is corrupt, the military should come in to set things right.” An F-test for differences in means shows no significant difference between the two. Upon further inspection, however, the Bangkok portion of the sample turns out to be highly polarized in its responses, while the sample from the rest of Thailand is relatively evenly distributed across the 10 categories. Among Bangkok respondents, 44.6 percent responded “Strongly Agree” (scored as 10) with this statement, but a corresponding 34.8 percent responded “Strongly Disagree” (scored as 1). In other words, over 75 percent of Bangkok respondents are sharply polarized; they locate themselves on extreme ends of the scale with regard to the desirability of a military coup. Although means of the two groups do not differ substantially, the distributions vary dramatically, indicating a high level of polarization in Bangkok conducive to potential conflicts.

Social and Political Cleavages between Urban and Non-Urban Populations in Thailand, 2006

What are the sources of these documented political cleavages between Bangkok and non-Bangkok residents? The data allow further explorations of attitudes and opinions in both social and political dimensions that discriminate between Bangkok and non-Bangkok societies in Thailand.

The data in Table 10 indicate existing cleavages between these two societies and cultures. Of all social issues distinguishing between the two populations, safety and trust are the most distinguishing differences. Ironically (and contrary to expectations), urban

respondents appear to feel more insecure and lacking in social trust than those in rural areas. Nevertheless, these differences are significant and help to explain why urban dwellers appear more amenable to military interventions to preserve “law and order.”

Table 10: Social and Political Attitudes Distinguishing Bangkok and Non-Bangkok Populations in Thailand

Variables	% Agree or “Yes”		
	% Bangkok	% Non-Bangkok	p<
<i>Social Attitudes</i>			
“Most people can be trusted” ¹	15.9	41.6	.000
“Most people can be trusted” ²	20.5	66.3	.000
“Compared to a few years ago do you feel more safe” (more)	35.4	47.1	.000
“How safe is your community (very)”	37.6	82.7	.000
“Economic situation of family in a few years (better)”	72.4	65.5	.000
<i>Political Attitudes</i>			
“Not satisfied with way democracy works”	13.5	6.5	.000
“Conflict among political groups is not bad”	58.6	47.4	.000
“Army should come in to govern”	31.1	20.6	.000
“Present political situation is good”	20.0	32.3	.000
“Last elections not free and fair” (2006)	17.7	8.3	.002
“Election conducted completely freely and fairly” (2006)	28.1	38.5	.000
“Personally experienced corruption”	35.9	6.9	.000

*Polls taken in 2005 and 2006.

¹ Classic two-part question: “Most people can be trusted”, “You can’t be too careful in dealing with other people.”² Four responses to “How much can you trust other people.”

Bangkok dwellers also appear significantly more negative about the state of political affairs than those living outside the metropole. Most Bangkok residents believe that the corruption of politics occurs primarily in rural areas, and they are far more likely to look with disdain on outcomes of elections as being free, fair, and otherwise representative of the Thai people, perhaps reflecting the Bangkok bias against rural voters. Some of this suspicion is based upon cultural differences noted above – but it also represents an elite disgust for Downsian voters who attempt to “maximize utility” in the electoral process.

Bangkok residents indicate a higher level of personal experience with corruption (Table 10). In fact, the overall experience of corruption in the sample is only 9.6%. When respondents were asked for their "agreement" or "disagreement" with a statement "sometimes corruption in government is necessary in order to get things done," 30.3% of Bangkok respondents "Strongly agreed," whereas only 6.4% of non-Bangkok residents supported such a view. Clearly, Bangkok residents have a considerably higher tolerance of corruption, as well as a higher level of personal experience. These data are mirrored in relative evaluations of corruption in government, with 37.9% of Bangkok respondents indicating that most or all officials are corrupt, but only 24.7% of non-Bangkok residents indicating the same evaluation of government officials.

It is too facile to view these cleavages either as a product only of class or even of the Bangkok-non-Bangkok divide. There is also another, more subtle, dimension to the emerging political conflict. The conflict over the Thaksin regime exposed significant

differences between “traditional elites” and the masses in their understandings of popular democracy. Publicly expressed views of academics and supporters of traditional society indicate that the “reformers” expected voters to support traditional elites, that is, those who were “supposed” to lead the nation. The capture of the government by mass (as opposed to elite-led) democracy brought about a corresponding disillusionment with democratic elections among intellectual and urban elites. This sentiment was represented by academic and social activist Thirayuth Boonmi, who was quoted by the Bangkok Post as saying that it was worrisome that Prime Minister Thaksin had mobilized the poor --- *and gotten them involved in politics* (italics mine). What was even more worrisome, he went on to say, was that *the poor voted differently from the middle class* (italics also mine).⁹ The conflict between an emerging, mass-based democracy and traditions embedded in a hierarchical society pose a major obstacle to further consolidation of Thai democracy.

Among the “traditional elites” who have become increasingly uncomfortable with democracy are the “royalists.” Unable to unseat Thaksin by legitimate means, royalist elites made alliances with anti-Thaksin protest movements to the extent that representatives of the anti-Thaksin alliances appeared often “at the door of the palace” asking for help in turning Thaksin out of office. Thaksin did not help his cause by appearing to compete with the king, especially in insinuating himself into ceremonies honoring the 60th year of the king’s accession to the throne. The hard line taken by the government in denying full control in the South to the military and interference in the annual reshuffle of military officers alienated key elements of powerful elites that had

⁹ Report in the Bangkok Post of a comment on a Thaksin speech to supporters at a rally in Sanam Luang on March 12, 2006.

been quiescent for over a decade. In addition, efforts to rein in the bureaucracy, the Ministry of the Interior in particular, alienated holders of powerful positions that make Thailand function and the historic "bureaucratic polity" does not go quietly.

A series of events foretold the coup for those who are sensitive to the intricacies of Thai politics. A series of speeches by Prem Tinsulanonda, spokesman for the Privy Council, and, thus, the voice of the king, indirectly chastised developments within the government, but, more importantly, in speeches to various military groups, reminded the military officers that the military belonged to the king, not the government. A visit by General Songthi to the palace preceded the mobilization of the military to take over the government, to replace the Prime Minister, and to abrogate the Constitution of 1997. This was followed by immediate approval of the coup by the monarch. As one Thai scholar put it, "If the king didn't give a nod, this never would have been possible."¹⁰

Constitutional "Reform"

Many Thai intellectuals have little regard for constitutions; therefore, the abrogation of the Constitution of 1997, has evoked only scant elite opposition. This constitution, however, has been suggested as the basic document for any new reform efforts and has received support from Abhisit Vejjajiva, leader of the opposition Prajadhipat (Democrat) Party. The Constitution of 1997 outlines explicit political and human rights unmatched in most constitutions of democratic states. Whether a new constitution will infringe upon or maintain these rights remains an open question.

Because the new Constitutional Drafting Assembly is squarely in the hands of Bangkok elites, agitators for constitutional reform are united in attempting to write a constitution that will prevent concentrations of power such as those of the Thai Rak Thai

¹⁰ Quoted by Jocelyn Gecker in www.apnews.myway.com, 9/20/2006.

party during the past five years. The Constitution of 1997, was designed, of course, to overcome the anarchy of coalition governments that proved unstable and were associated with the economic collapse of the late 1990s. The solution appears to lie in what Thais refer to as “checks and balances.” These are a series of institutions designed to countermand the government in a variety of sensitive areas, including the Election Commission, the Constitutional Court, the Administrative Court, a Human Rights Commission, and a National Counter-Corruption Commission.

The Constitution of 1997, however, never solved the problem of how these bodies were to be constituted. The solution was to have members of these agencies appointed by a theoretically nonpartisan Senate. Because these bodies often found in favor of the government, criticism of the Thaksin administration began to spill over onto these independent bodies. At this point, it is not clear how the issue of appointments to what are, in principle, watchdog bodies will be resolved. Furthermore, it is probably naïve to think that all aspects of corruption can be forestalled by any constitutional document. In fact, many of the complaints about elections actually target organic laws, not provisions of the Constitution. The elites, who will dominate the constitutional drafting assembly, will attempt to make sure that the threat of populist government does not arise again.

Analysis and Conclusions

The history of democracy in Thailand has been one of elite-guided democracy. These elites, heavily royalist, have always been represented geographically in terms of geographic location – Bangkok versus the hinterland. Whether these Bangkok-based royalist intellectual and social elites will cede political authority to the hinterland remains the major issue for democratic governance, that is, progress toward mass-based

democracy. Dominance by Bangkok elites of the press and academic discourse makes this course an uphill struggle, and foreign media interpretations often rely on the very elites whose interest is at stake. The mantra of “corruption,” repeated so often by elites opposed to Thaksin to justify the coup, is not perceived by the nation as a whole, especially in the rural areas

The data on Bangkok-non-Bangkok cleavages reinforce a view that the effects of “culture” are diverse within a single nation. Furthermore, variations in cultural orientations within Thai society appear to arise primarily from orientations to life from the city and the countryside and, to only a small degree, from differing positions in society related to socioeconomic status or class. These variations by sector are so significant that it is difficult to refer to any aggregate of attitudes and opinions as distinctively “Thai.” In fact, there is an expectation that differing distributions of populations on these dimensions underlie what we often observe as differences with other nations. In other words, variance within nations on these dimensions supercedes variance among nations. There are no distinctly “Asian values” other than those that derive from the variation in rural and urban cultures or other such dimensions, and the search for distinctly “Thai” values appears chimerical at best. A more detailed explication of these variations cries out for further analysis.

Traditionalistic versus modernistic orientations to society and interpersonal behavior are also products of these social forces. The data show, first, that traditional values turn out to be multi-dimensional. Furthermore, these dimensions are related to class and status, but also, more importantly, to location of people in what we call “Urban” or “Rural” cultures. When Laothamatas argues that Thailand represents significantly

different evaluations of democracy, he is actually referring to a distribution of distinctly different cultures characterizing Bangkok and non-Bangkok areas. Because of the dramatic differences in cultural orientations, there are corresponding differences in support for democracy.

Perhaps even more important is the fact that these cultures support very different kinds of “democracy.” Rural and low-status respondents appear to support a popular, majoritarian form of government. When it comes to protections of minority rights, beyond free speech, the entire matrix of support reverses itself. Rural, low status respondents, and adherents of traditional values support the former; urban, upper-status, and less traditional (that is, more cosmopolitan) support the latter. Thailand is, as Laothamatas observed a “tale of two democracies.”

Culture values break down into three dimensions, by definition orthogonal: family values orientations, commitments to traditional modes of resolving conflict, and aversion to conflict. These dimensions have their origins in demographic factors, notably rural-urban location and socioeconomic status. On balance, traditional orientations tend to support the idea of democracy, but oppose restraints on popular rule, in the form of preferences for judicial and legislative control of society under a rule of law. The experience of many Thais, perhaps, makes them somewhat cynical about the efficacy of the rule of law, but this is one of the dimensions that clearly distinguish between cosmopolitan, upper-status elites and the rest of Thai society. While significant majorities of the Thai population oppose domination of the political system by the military or other elites, a majority in some cases would accept government control of the judiciary or even the parliament in order to promote the well-being of the Thai nation. A principled support

for the rule of law, however, is weaker than support for mass democracy in Thailand.

This finding calls into question the blurring of distinctions between democracy and forms of pluralist democracy or “polyarchy.” The goal for democratic development has been the liberation of societies from authoritarian, sometimes dictatorial, rule, and Thailand appeared to have accomplished this objective and was well on its way to consolidating electoral and procedural democracy in all of its aspects.

Perhaps it is surprising to some that “democracy” finds significantly less support in urban than in rural society. Although some considerable part of this picture comes from idiosyncrasies of Thai history and politics, at least this study identifies significantly disparate cultures that separate urban from non-urban Thailand. Because the urban-non-urban indicator is essentially a “dummy” variable, this study also cries out for more elaboration from detailed surveys focusing on political attitudes within the Bangkok metropolitan area.

In the final analysis, the data paint a picture of a beleaguered capital city, highly protective, if not fearful, of its privileged position in Thai society. Because democracy transfers control of authority from traditional elites to disparate masses, the former understandably resist devolution of power away from the Bangkok centre, but overthrow of a democratically elected government by unconstitutional means, especially with the collaboration of the palace, is shattering for analysts who believed that Thailand was making progress away from an elite-dominated society. In this case, elites have responded to a populist government with a resounding “No, we will not tolerate mass rule! In the long run, however, only mass-based democracy can be called true democracy.

Earlier optimism about Thailand as a “democratic” state should have all but evaporated. Clearly, Bangkok elites will not tolerate the radical changes in society implied by mass democracy and democracy is not possible when elected governments do not have control over the instruments of force, the military. What is most disillusioning for lovers of Thai democracy is that Thailand had come so far.

APPENDIX 1

Definitions of Variables Used in the Analysis

Support for Democracy: Sum of five Z-scores* from responses on:

1. desirability of democracy – now
2. want democracy
2. suitability of democracy
3. satisfaction with democracy
4. preference for democracy
5. ability of democracy to solve problems

Modernism: Factor scores of questions indicating self-placement on scales of rural-urban in orientation, how "modern" (*thansammy*) respondents evaluated themselves, and whether the music they liked was traditional or modern.

SES (Socioeconomic status): Factor scores on one natural factor of monthly income, years of education, and occupational status.

Optimism about Respondent's Current Condition and Economic Future: Response to question on economic situation “now” and on future of respondent in five years: 5-point scale from “Very Bad to Very Good” and “Much Worse – Much Better.” A 3 represents a response of “So-so.”

Commitment to the Rule of Law and Pluralist Democracy: Sums of Z-scores

1. If country in difficulty, it is OK to disregard laws.
2. Government leaders should be followed like heads of families.
3. Government should decide what should be discussed.
4. Judges should defer to the executive.
5. Legislatures interfere with government.
6. Political leaders should be able to ignore procedure.
7. With support, leaders should ignore minority views

* Z-scores are used to control for divergent variances in the indicators.

Appendix 2

Factor Analysis of Questions Indicating Adherence to Modern (as Opposed to Traditional) Values: Varimax Solution

<u>Questions</u>	<u>Factor 1</u> <u>Family Values</u>	<u>Factor 2</u> <u>Conflict Resolution</u>	<u>Factor 3</u> <u>Conflict Avoidance</u>
Obedience to parents even if demands are unreasonable	.672	.170	-.196
Hiring friends and relatives a priority	.546	.259	-.298
Daughter-in-law should obey mother-in-law	.710	.036	.080
Man loses face under female supervisor	.682	-.075	.296
Accommodate neighbor when there is conflict	-.006	.840	.034
Quarrels should be mediated by a elder	.197	.720	.184
Person should give-in when there is conflict with co-workers	-.125	.070	.698
For family's sake, person should put own interest second	.126	.127	.688
Percent of Variance = 54.4			

APPENDIX 3

Attributes of Candidates in Thai Parliamentary Elections, 2005

<u>Questions</u>	<u>Factor 1</u> <u>Ability-Capability</u>	<u>Factor 2</u> <u>Localism</u>	<u>Factor 3</u> <u>Personalism</u>
Political Experience	.535	.078	.499
Do beneficial things for			

the community	.679	.130	.303
Good Vision	.747	.178	.085
Honesty	.816	.019	-.033
Able to solve community problems	.811	.142	.023
Help people in the community	.105	.774	.016
Able to bring money to the community	.340	.538	.126
Commitment to do something for the community	.089	.669	.158
Always help friends	.034	.742	.218
Personality	-.031	.116	.637
High Education	.285	.074	.698
Good financial status	.015	.401	.598

Percent of Variance = 55.6

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The Asian Barometer Survey (ABS) grows out of the Comparative Survey of Democratization and Value Change in East Asia Project (also known as East Asia Barometer), which was launched in mid-2000 and funded by the Ministry of Education of Taiwan under the MOE-NSC Program for Promoting Academic Excellence of University. The headquarters of ABS is based in Taipei, and is jointly sponsored by the Department of Political Science at NTU and the Institute of Political Science of Academia Sinica. The East Asian component of the project is coordinated by Prof. Yun-han Chu, who also serves as the overall coordinator of the Asian Barometer. In organizing its first-wave survey (2001-2003), the East Asia Barometer (EABS) brought together eight country teams and more than thirty leading scholars from across the region and the United States. Since its founding, the EABS Project has been increasingly recognized as the region's first systematic and most careful comparative survey of attitudes and orientations toward political regime, democracy, governance, and economic reform.

In July 2001, the EABS joined with three partner projects -- New Europe Barometer, Latinobarometro and Afrobarometer -- in a path-breathing effort to launch Global Barometer Survey (GBS), a global consortium of comparative surveys across emerging democracies and transitional societies.

The EABS is now becoming a true pan-Asian survey research initiative. New collaborative teams from Indonesia, Singapore, Cambodia, and Vietnam are joining the EABS as the project enters its second phase (2004-2008). Also, the State of Democracy in South Asia Project, based at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (in New Delhi) and directed by Yogendra Yadav, is collaborating with the EABS for the creation of a more inclusive regional survey network under the new identity of the Asian Barometer Survey. This path-breaking regional initiative builds upon a substantial base of completed scholarly work in a number of Asian countries. Most of the participating national teams were established more than a decade ago, have acquired abundant experience and methodological know-how in administering nationwide surveys on citizen's political attitudes and behaviors, and have published a substantial number of works both in their native languages and in English.

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