

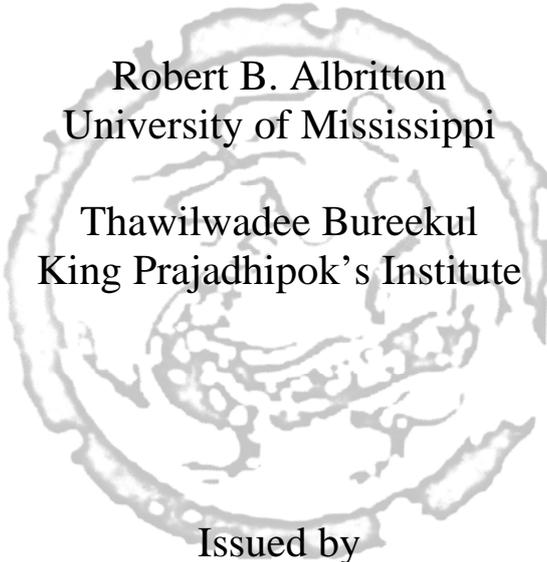


A Comparative Survey of

DEMOCRACY, GOVERNANCE AND DEVELOPMENT

Working Paper Series: No. 17

Developing Electoral Democracy in a Developing
Nations: Thailand



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A Comparative Survey of Democracy, Governance and Development

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DEVELOPING ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY IN A DEVELOPING NATION: THAILAND

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Introduction

Thailand now celebrates over 70 years of democracy, dating to the downfall of the absolute monarchy in 1932. In fact, however, only about six intervening years could be characterized as “democratic” prior to 1985. Regardless of the forms of government, however, a commitment to democracy – even an “ideology” of democracy – maintained itself through periods of one-party rule, autocracy, military despotism and true experiments with democratic governance. Consolidation of democratic government, beginning in the mid-1980s, fed upon this latent democratic commitment in the mass public, and established itself in the events of “bloody May,” 1992, when mass demonstrations forced a military junta to recede from the temporary government, permit new elections, and institute what has proven to be an uninterrupted path of democracy for over a decade. This paper documents and evaluates this progress toward democracy by examining the evidence for democratic consolidation as defined in mass opinion (Linz and Stepan, 2001), after the adoption of a new constitution that significantly revises the structures of electoral democracy in Thailand.

Historical Development of Democratic Governance in Thailand

A palace coup at dawn on July 24, 1932, brought the Thai absolute monarchy to an end. When he finally, abdicated the throne, in 1935, King Prajadhipok (Rama VII) specifically criticized the regime that had replaced him and, in a brief, public message, transferred sovereignty to the people of Thailand. In his message of abdication, the King made an important distinction between turning over power to the people, rather than to the government: “I am willing to surrender the

powers I formerly exercised to the people as a whole, but I am not willing to turn them over to any individual or any group to use in an autocratic manner without heeding the voice of the people” (Wyatt, 1982: 249). In these events, Thai democratic government began, and the sentiment of this ideology has characterized Thai democracy even to this day.

Concept of the Study

Celebration of the Aera of democracy or the Athird wave of democracy has become tempered by concerns about the ability of democracies to survive. Distinctions between Asemi-democracies and Ademocracies - or even Apolyarchies - have become less significant than their Aconsolidation or persistence (Diamond and Plattner, 2001). Linz and Stepan define a Aconsolidated democracy as one in which: 1) no national, social, economic, or institutional constituencies attempt to create a non-democratic regime or secede from the state; 2) a strong majority of public opinion believes that democratic institutions and procedures are the most appropriate way to govern, even in the face of major economic problems or dissatisfaction with incumbents; 3) governmental and nongovernmental groups accept the control of laws, procedures, and institutions created through democratic processes (2001, 95). Such a minimalist concept is a base point to begin deeper explorations of democratic survivability at the end of the Athird wave of democratic development.

The evolution of democracy in Thailand has been so dramatic that even the most ardent proponents of Thailand as a Asemi-democratic state now admit, grudgingly, that AThailand has been shifting incrementally away from semi-democracy toward democracy (Samudavaniya and Chotiya, 1998, 340) and ABy late 1992, Thailand ‘s government met our criteria for democracy in citizen participation, electoral competition, and civil liberties (Neher and Marlay, 1995, 49).

The radical transformation of the electoral system under the new constitution, however, brought about even more dramatic changes producing, for the first time, a majority party in

charge of governing, and a new set of institutions designed to place elections and government beyond reach of corruption, fraud, and abuse of the voting process. The establishment of these truly democratic institutions and practices in Thailand, admittedly, has been a relatively recent phenomenon. There remains, then, room for an issue of the degree of democratic consolidation (Linz and Stepan, 2001; O'Donnell, 2001) in an evaluation of the status of democracy in Thailand.

As Linz and Stepan indicate, one of the most significant measures of democratic consolidation is the level of public opinion holding the belief that democracy is the most appropriate system for governing collective life (2001). This paper presents data from the Thai portion of a multi-national study of democratization and value change in East Asia testing this measure of democratic consolidation in the Thai case.

Data on Mass Support for Democracy

Where does democracy in Thailand stand today? What follows is a detailed analysis of mass attitudes toward democracy as they take shape at the beginning of the 21st century. The data for this analysis were obtained in a probability sample of eligible voters in the Thai nation during November-December, 2001.¹ The procedure for obtaining these data is a three-stage probability sample based upon clusters of legislative districts, then of voting units (precincts), followed by a systematic sampling of voters in the selected voting units. The sample includes 50 of the 400 legislative districts, 100 voting units from across the 50 legislative districts, and 1500 respondents from the 100 voting units. Roughly 1500 respondents are drawn from a population of 54,894. Because the skip interval exceeded 36, a more conservative approach using 36 as the interval yielded 1546 respondents.

This process produces a true probability sample of the Thai eligible electorate and

¹ "Eligible voters" includes all Thai citizens 18 years of age and older.

represents one of the few probability-based samples of the Thai population for political and social attitudes. Here, we present the data that characterize the Thai population across the kingdom in attitudes toward democracy, indicating the level of attitudinal consolidation of democratic values among the Thai people.

The Meaning of Democracy in the Thai Political Context

The ideology of democracy that began in 1932 and appears to have lasted throughout democratic, despotic, and authoritarian governments is sometimes considered to ascribe ambiguous meanings to the concept of democracy. Wyatt (1984) suggests that, during the early days of constitutional governance, enthusiasm for democracy was not dampened by the fact that people had no clear idea of the meaning of *constitution* and *democracy*.² In a more modern context, the debate over “Asian values” suggests that there are significant semantic differentials in understandings of democracy, between those who hold essentially procedural views of democracy and those who hold more substantive ones.

The data permit tests of these alternative views of the meanings of democracy in an open-ended answer to the question: “When you think of democracy, what is the first thing that comes to your mind?” When these meanings ascribed to “democracy” are examined, the Thai public shows consistent and unambiguous commitments to procedural democracy and the general rights and privileges for individuals afforded by democratic government. Only slightly over 70 percent of Thai respondents could formulate clear concepts of the meaning of “democracy” (Table 1), only 25 percent were able to give a second response, and about 7 percent, a third, but, among those who responded, understandings of democracy do not appear to differ substantially from European and American cohorts. Table 1 indicates that over 50 percent perceive democracy in terms of traditional values of liberal democracy; 38.2 percent of the

² According to Wyatt (1984:250), some thought that the word for democracy (*prachathipatai*) referred to King

sample gave responses such as “freedom of speech, press, expression;” and another 15.1 percent gave responses indicating political equality – “one man one vote,” “equality before the law.” “Individualism” (11.9 percent) was a combination of values such as “respect for individual privacy,” “self-reliance,” “having one’s own views,” “independence.”

Most surprising was the low response rate in terms of traditional “Asian values” as commonly understood – good governance, social equality, or duties to society. Only one respondent mentioned “openness or government transparency,” and no one mentioned “solving employment,” “providing social welfare,” or “finding someone a job.” No one suggested freedom from corruption.

Table 1: Meaning of Democracy Offered by Thai Respondents in Open-ended Questions, 2001, N=1546 (Positive Responses to Question: “When you hear the word ‘Democracy’ what first comes to mind?”)

<u>Categories of Response</u>	<u>Percent Responding</u>	<u>Cumulative Percent</u>
Freedom and Civil Liberties	38.2	38.2
Political Equality	15.2	53.4
Individualism	11.9	65.3
Equality, Justice, or Fraternity	7.7	73.0
Participation and Citizen Empowerment	7.2	80.2
Democratic Process	7.2	87.4
Generic Responses to Democracy	6.0	93.4
Participation and Citizen Empowerment	5.0	98.4
Duties	1.3	99.7
Good Governance	0.3	100.0
No substance in answer, DK, No response = Missing		29.7

These data do not necessarily conform to elite opinion. What is important is that the data represent a true probability sample of the Thai population one year after parliamentary elections. The data do show clear perceptions of the meaning of democracy – even by comparison with international contexts and suggest that Thai views of democracy are not alternatives to the general meanings of liberal democracy in international discourse. Furthermore, these views

appear consistent throughout Thailand and are not the province of Bangkok residents or of an elite middle-class. Furthermore, the data indicate a consistent understanding of democracy among respondents.

Equally important is the fact that no significant number of respondents mentions development of traditional institutions associated with democratic governments. Given that respondents could indicate up to three “meanings of democracy,” it is worth noting that there were no mentions of development of political parties or even parliaments as a component of democratic governance. For most Thais, in fact, political parties and parliaments seem to be part of the problem, rather than part of the solution. In accord with its beginning, the picture of democracy painted by Thai responses is majoritarian, rather than representative, government. In the struggle to achieve popular democracy, Thais have not come to terms with “republican” or representative government.

As will be noted, the quest for a “people’s democracy” does not necessarily encompass pluralist institutions. The Constitution of 1997 underlines this tendency by including provisions ruling out a role for political parties in constituting the Senate, the watchdog agencies, and the major judicial institutions. It seems that, if given a choice, Thais would prefer government by referendum. The Constitution even specifies that public participation is required at every level of government.³ The evidence is that Thais do not relish the idea of leaving government and policy to its institutions alone; there is clearly a desire for and understanding of the Constitution as creating popular democracy.

Support for Democracy

The analysis of data from the national probability sample of the Thai electorate shows a very

³What is meant by “public participation” is currently being negotiated in a legislative act before the Parliament.

high level of respondents expressing support for democratic processes. Table 2 shows that over 90 percent of the electorate is satisfied with democracy and the way it works in Thailand. In addition, 84.3 percent say that democracy is always preferable to authoritarian forms of government and over 90 percent indicate confidence in the ability of democracy to solve problems of the nation (Table 2). Using a ten-point scale evaluating democracy in Thailand, less than 3 percent of the sample

Table 2: Commitment to Democracy of Thai Respondents, 2001 N=1546

How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way democracy works in our country?

	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Valid Percent</u>
Not at all satisfied	16	1.0	1.1
Not very satisfied	128	8.3	8.4
Fairly satisfied	845	54.7	55.7
Very satisfied	529	34.2	34.8
Missing	<u>28</u>	<u>1.8</u>	100.0
Total	1546	100.0	

Which of the following statements is closest to your opinion?

	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Valid Percent</u>
Under some circumstance authoritarian government is preferable	163	10.5	10.6
For people like me it does not matter	78	5.0	5.1
Democracy is always preferable	1295	83.8	<u>84.3</u>
Missing	<u>10</u>	<u>.6</u>	100.0
Total	1546	100.0	

Which of the following statements is closer to your own view?

	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Valid Percent</u>
Democracy cannot solve our problems	141	9.1	9.2

What is clear, however, is that it extends far beyond public hearings in the minds of Thai citizens.

Democracy is capable of solving our problems	1388	89.8	<u>90.8</u>
Missing	<u>17</u>	<u>1.1</u>	100.0
Total	1546	100.0	

agrees that democracy is unsuitable for Thailand and over 90 percent want democracy now (Table 3). In a superficial way, perhaps, Thais are highly supportive of the Aidea of democracy in virtually every dimension.

Table 3: Preference for Democracy over Authoritarian Government, 2001
N=1546

How suitable is democracy for Thailand today?

	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Valid Percent</u>
Democracy is totally unsuitable	9	.6	.6
2	12	.8	.8
3	4	.3	.3
4	8	.5	.6
5	61	3.9	4.2
6	55	3.6	3.8
7	123	8.0	8.5
8	229	14.8	15.8
9	207	13.4	14.3
Democracy is perfectly suitable	740	47.9	<u>51.1</u>
Missing	<u>98</u>	<u>6.3</u>	100.0
Total	1546	100.0	

To what extent would you want our country to be democratic now?

	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Valid Percent</u>
Completely authoritarian	5	.3	.3
2	0	.0	.0
3	3	.2	.2
4	3	.2	.2
5	27	1.7	1.8
6	33	2.1	2.3
7	53	3.4	3.6
8	136	8.8	9.3
9	207	13.4	14.1
Completely democratic	999	64.6	<u>68.1</u>
Missing	<u>80</u>	<u>5.1</u>	100.0
Total	1546	100.0	

An 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, letting the military run things, or having a nation governed by experts, respondents reject these alternatives by significant margins (Table 4). Among these alternatives to an elected parliament, support for military governance is lowest, with over 80 percent rejecting this alternative.

**Table 4: Percent of Respondents Accepting Alternatives to Democracy, 2001
N=1546**

	<u>SA</u>	<u>A</u>	<u>D</u>	<u>SD</u>
<i>Opposition parties should be abolished</i>	12.1	24.9	36.2	26.8
<i>The military should come in to govern the country</i>	5.8	13.1	31.1	50.0
<i>We should get rid of parliament and let experts decide everything</i>	6.9	13.9	30.8	48.4
<i>We should replace parliament with a strong leader</i>	6.7	15.7	32.9	44.7

SA=Strongly Agree; A=Agree; D=Disagree; SD=Strongly Disagree; percentages are of valid responses, e.g., the data exclude missing values.

The major implication of these data is that Thais, while committed to “democratic government,” are somewhat less committed to institutions commonly associated with democracy. Fully 37 percent of respondents favor abolishing political parties, but these data require interpretation as a general distaste for political parties rather than a rejection of democracy. Roughly 80 percent oppose other alternatives to democratic institutions. In our view, these data imply that nonpartisan government, possibly government by referenda, would be the preference of a significant majority of Thais.

Another important dimension in the issue of support for democracy is the role of the middle class. The traditional emphasis on the A middle-class 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 Anek (1996), who argues that the 1991 coup could not have been sustained except for support from the middle class, and Chai-anan (1998), who notes that the role of the middle class in Thailand, vis-à-vis democracy, has been A reactive rather than proactive (156) and that its primary interest in democracy has been A to safeguard their own freedom and the freedom of the market (1998:158).

This study addresses the issue of support for democracy from a class perspective, as well as from the perspective of an urban-rural cleavage that marks Thai politics. Taken together, these issues represent some of the more pressing concerns for democracy in Thailand. Here, we present the empirical data that outline the variations in Thai society as they indicate the true political diversity of the Thai people.

Table 4 shows support for democracy in an analysis of variance using five categories by location of respondents.⁴ The data are consistent with previous findings

**Table 4: Analysis of Variance in Support for Democracy by Location, 2001
N=1546**

	Mean Score	N	SE	F-level	Sig. of F
<i>Muang</i>	28.1719	128	.2665	9.062	.000
<i>Suburb</i>	27.9919	248	.2230		
<i>Rural</i>	28.7599	883	.0987		
<i>BKK Downtown</i>	26.8939	66	.4775		
<i>BKK Suburbs</i>	27.5867	75	.0853		
Total	28.4193	1400			

⁴AMuang are provincial (*changwat*) capitals.

that Bangkok respondents are significantly lower in their support for democracy than other locations. A Downtown Bangkok, or the core city, shows the lowest score on democratic support, while rural respondents show the highest levels of support for democratic governance

Suchit Bungbongkarn (1996) has argued that people with higher levels of education are a) more cynical about politics, and b) therefore, less likely to participate in democratic processes, such as elections. His argument is based upon substantially lower voter turnouts in Bangkok than in the rest of the country. The argument, however, is an ecological one and the data of this study represent a possibility for testing this proposition on an individual level.

When OLS regression is used to estimate impacts of education and Bangkok residency on political participation, the results support Suchit 's analysis. Also confirming the analysis of Logerfo 's data (1996), however, Bangkok respondents are significantly less likely to participate in political activity, even controlling for education (Table 5). The results are virtually the same when support for democracy is analyzed by Bangkok residency controlling for general socioeconomic status. Analysis shows that the higher the socioeconomic status, the lower the support for democracy.

Table 5: Regression of Political Participation Scores on Education and Bangkok Location, 2001
N=1546

Dependent Variable: Political Participation

Independent Variables	Regression Coefficients	t-test	Sig. of t
Years of education	-.017	-3.086	.002
Bangkok	-.331	-4.389	.000
(Constant)	7.284	46.570	.000

R=.156

There are, nevertheless, independent effects of Bangkok residency that have negative impacts on support for democracy even controlling for education and socioeconomic status. The

evidence consistently supports the view that democracy has less support from elites, especially Bangkok elites, than it does among the rural majorities in the Thai hinterland.

The Role of Social Capital in the Thai Political Context

According to some scholars, the strength of any society, including democracies, is a direct function of the levels of social capital that obtain in that society. Thus, the level of social capital has significant implications for democratic consolidation.

Social capital in Thailand is represented by two measurable concepts: the level of trust in government and in the society and the development of civil society both of which contribute to the sustainability and consolidation of an evolved democracy. In addition to aggregate, institutional measures, social capital is based in the attitudes and orientations of “ordinary people.” This analysis presents the Thai data that measure dimensions of social capital in the attitudes and opinions of members of Thai society. In the larger context, the data permit a basis for examining the sources of social capital, as well as the impacts of various measures on a democratic society.

The literature, in general, focuses on two measures that are relevant to a consideration of civil society: an index of informal socializing and social trust. Our indicators of group membership and informal social activity are rough proxies for participation in civil society; for social trust, we use a similar question inquiring as to ability to trust others, offering an alternative that “you cannot be too careful in dealing with other people,” as well as overall trust in public institutions. These measures provide evidence as critical indicators of social capital resources in the Thai context. *Social Trust*

Thai society and culture are marked most strongly by deference to well-understood hierarchies. This deference to authority may account for a relatively high degree of trust in government institutions (Table 8). All of the institutions examined in Table 8, garner majority

support of the Thai population. The interesting point, then, is the relative trust Thais bestow on the various institutions.

Respondents express a great deal of trust in two of the new institutions created by the current constitution, the Constitutional Court and the Counter-Corruption Commission (Table 6). The levels of trust are so high that those who express low levels of trust may be attributed to a cynical minority, present in every society. The third institution created by the constitution, the Electoral Commission, also receives a high level of trust, but suffers, probably, from controversies associated with rulings in the Senate election, disqualifying 78 of the 200 candidates receiving the most votes, and requiring as many as five waves of re-elections in some provinces. In addition, the associations of this latter institution with controversial electoral rulings, such as invalidating outcomes on the basis of charges, rather than evidence, have tarnished the reputation of this institution to a minor degree. Even so, the Electoral Commission receives substantial trust from 70 percent of the population, implying that these basic, constitutional institutions command a large measure of confidence and respect among Thai citizens.

Table 6: Trust in Social and Political Institutions (In Percent of Valid percent), 2001
N=1546

How much trust do you have in each of the following institutions?

	A great deal	Quite a lot	Not much	None at all
The Courts	24.4	49.0	23.9	2.7
National Government	18.0	51.1	28.6	2.3
Political Parties	11.5	40.2	42.1	6.3
Parliament	14.3	46.3	34.0	5.5
Civil Service	17.7	51.6	26.2	4.5
The Military	29.6	50.4	17.4	2.6
The Police	16.6	42.0	33.9	7.5
Local Government	21.3	46.8	26.3	5.6
Newspapers	11.6	44.1	39.5	4.8
Television	22.8	56.7	19.1	1.4
The Election Commission	20.2	49.8	26.0	4.0
NGOs	12.9	46.8	33.0	7.2

Local MPs	17.0	45.5	30.8	6.7
Constitutional Court	33.5	48.3	15.2	3.0
Counter-Corruption Commission	31.5	48.3	17.7	2.5

At the lower end of the scale stand the political parties (Table 6). The finding that over half of the respondents still express trust in these important components of democracy is notable. The relevant perspective requires cross-national comparisons of the commendably high level of trust, even for political parties, when compared with other emerging democracies - a finding that would surprise quite a few Thais.

Another surprising finding is that newspapers have the second lowest level of trust (Table 6). What some observers might regard as a wonderfully open and critical press may be looked upon as a rancorous intrusion into an otherwise complacent society. What puts this in perspective is the high level of trust in television (Table 6). It should be noted that some of the most prominent Thai television channels are controlled by the government, helping to facilitate trust in government institutions or vice versa. To date, there has been little examination of the impact of the media on Thai society, especially the relative impacts of print and “hot” media venues.⁵

Compared to the level of trust in political parties, newspapers, and NGOs (59.8), the level of trust in the police is remarkable (Table 6). Even more significant is the very high level of trust accorded the military (80 percent), exceeded only by the Constitutional Court. The fact that the military is, virtually, the most trusted instrument of government indicates that years of military rule and the massacres of civilians in 1976 and 1991 have done little to undermine the unmitigated confidence in the military, compared with other institutions.⁶ In this same vein,

⁵ For a thorough examination of the Thai press, see Duncan McCargo, *Politics and the Press in Thailand*.

⁶ A public opinion poll by the Chronicle of Higher Education in the United States in April 2003, shows that 93 percent of Americans express confidence in the military, with 65 percent indicating “a great deal,” far above Congress, State Government, the President, physicians and hospitals, and Local Government. Local police forces

higher levels of trust in the civil service, compared with the parliament, hark to recent history characterized by a deeply rooted bureaucratic polity (Riggs, 1966).

Finally, it bears mentioning that the level of trust in the national government is at least equal to, if not significantly higher, than confidence in local government (Table 6). One reason that the two are so close on this dimension is that, heretofore, they have been virtually the same. With local government officials appointed by the central government through a central bureaucracy, rather than recruitment at the local level, it would be difficult for respondents to distinguish in many details which level held jurisdiction in any particular arena. The data, plus a rather surprising response that 81.3 percent believe that the national government should exercise more authority over local government, reflecting greater knowledge of and proximity to the performance of local government, however, indicate at least one of the ambiguities inherent in the move toward decentralization of local government currently under way in Thailand.

Social capital of trust in fellow citizens, by contrast, is exceptionally low. When asked whether “most people can be trusted” or “you cannot be too careful in dealing with other people,” 81.1 percent (82.3 percent of those who responded) chose the latter. Contrary to images of Asian society as communal, Thais tend to be disconnected from significant identifications with other members of society. This picture of a society composed of individuals relatively disassociated from each other is reinforced by an examination of participation in civil society below.

Civil Society in the Thai Context

Danny Unger (1998) argues, from a variety of studies (Ayal, 1963; Embree, 1950; Narthsupha, 1979), that the ability of Thais to engage in associational relationships is significantly low. References to Thai society characterized by “anarchistic individualism” or “loosely structured” social life (p. 28) indicate patterns of social interaction that not only contrast sharply with the

were third with 89 percent and 48 percent respectively.

culture of “Confucian values,” but also create an environment that makes development of civil society difficult, indeed.

Theories of civil society are silent as to causes of civil society participation in associated with individual behavior. More specifically, they do not suggest whether civil society is a trait associated with rural or urban populations.⁷ Because scholars tend to conceive urban society as containing more complex forms of social organization, one would anticipate higher levels of civil society in urban areas. Urban society, however, also encourages isolation and anonymity in ways that may produce opposite effects. Because cleavages between rural and urban society are so prominent in the Thai context (Laothamatas, 1996; Albritton and Bureekul, 2002), this analysis also tests plausible hypotheses connecting civil society with its locations in rural or urban environments.

A corresponding set of hypotheses includes associations between civil society and social class. In principle, civil society should be independent of social class and status, that is, true civil society should include associations from all social strata. The research question here is: “Do middle class citizens participate in higher levels of social organization than citizens of lower status?”

Scholars suggest that civil society in Thailand ought to be dominated by the middle class (Wasi, 2002). A plausible rival hypothesis suggests that the civil society emerging in Thailand is formed from the need of underprivileged masses to have a voice in political society. The Forum of the Poor is one example of associations that give voice to the lower classes in a contest for dominance of the development of political democracy. The data contained in this study offer tentative evidence of civil society development under Thai democracy, especially in the context of defined rights and liberties outlined by the Constitution of 1997.

The data provide two indicators of individual level participation in civil society

⁷ Unger argues cogently that traditions of Thai rural society, including the individualism of Buddhism, may be

associations by Thai respondents. The first is a general measure of group membership – “Are you a member of any formal groups or associations?” and “Are you a member of any informal groups or associations?” The second is an summed index of specific group memberships in formal organizations, such as residential associations, labor unions, cooperatives, or volunteer groups and a summed index of membership in informal associations, such as a circle of colleagues who interact outside work, friends who share common hobbies, or those who get together regularly to share information. We offer these indicators as measures of participation in civil society, claiming that they are very close to the concepts described by Putnam (2000) and Linz and Stepan (2001).⁸

Organizational membership in Thai society is low. Only 39.1 percent of Thai respondents claim membership in any formal organization (Table 7). When informal associations in groups are the subject of discussion, only 13.5 percent claim to socialize with others in group activity (Table 7). A breakdown of formal associations by type indicates that the overwhelming proportion of formal group identifications is accounted for by residential associations (21.7) and agricultural associations (17.0). Trade associations, labor unions, volunteer groups and citizen movement activity is

TABLE 7: Percent Claiming Formal and Informal Affiliations in Civil Society Associations

	Percent Yes	Percent No
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inimical to associational life. (See Mulder, 1985; Piker, 1979; Wichiencharoen, 1976).

⁸ Putnam defines *civil society* at the end of his acclaimed work, **Bowling Alone**, as a form of social capital (p. 400), and his concept of “civic recruitment” seems to reflect Linz and Stepan’s definition of civil society: “manifold social movements (for example, women’s groups, neighborhood associations, religious groupings, and intellectual organizations), as well as associations from all social strata (such as trade unions, entrepreneurial groups, and professional associations)” (2000:96).

Formal Associations	39.1	60.9
Informal Associations	13.5	86.5

non-significant in a statistical sense. Political memberships appear among the lowest of the possible associations. The profile of Thai citizens represented by this indicator is a civil society that appears relatively weak.

These data require a frame of reference in order to put them in perspective. Are these levels of citizen participation in civil society associations low? Putnam cites General Social Survey and other studies indicating that membership in organizations in the United States declined to a little less than 70 percent by the early 1990s

(2000: 59). In the larger study in which this one is embedded, Japan compares favorably with the United States (67.1 percent membership in formal groups, 49.0 percent participation in informal groups). Thailand lags substantially behind other Asian nations in informal associations: Korea – 47.2%; Hong Kong – 25.6%; Taiwan – 37.2. By these comparisons, civil society in Thailand is weak, indeed.

As noted above, the majority of participation in civil society association comes through involvement in agricultural associations and residential groups. Although residential groups may be related to urban living, it is unlikely that agricultural associations are found in urban areas. This implies that the levels of organizational affiliation may be higher in rural than non-rural areas. The general characteristics of participation in civil society are evident in Table 8, confirming the view that urban civil society is well below that of a rural context.

TABLE 8: Participation in Civil Society by Location in Rural or Urban Settings N=1546

Location of Respondents

	Rural	Muang	Suburban	Bangkok	Total
<i>Involvement in Civil Society</i>					
None	472 48.4%	103 75.7%	220 82.7%	158 94.0%	953 61.6%
Civil Society	504 51.6%	33 24.3%	46 17.3%	10 6.0%	593 38.4%
Total	976 100%	136 100%	266 100%	168 100%	1546 100%
<hr/>					
Chi-square = 218.8	Sig.=.000	Eta= .293	Gamma= -.627	Tau-c= -.238	

Participation in civil society is associated with age and, negatively, with SES. Older people are more likely to be involved in civil society movements than younger people and people of lower SES are more likely to be involved in civil society than upper status people. Both findings are somewhat counter to a conventional discourse that envisions civil society groups as largely confrontational in nature. The finding that civil society associations are identified more with older society, however, accords with Putnam's basic argument that the virtues of civil society associations are declining increasingly among the young. The finding that upper-status people are lower in civil society associations is most likely a result of their urban locations. In fact, SES and rural-urban location are so highly correlated ($r = .525$) that the two variables do not survive in the same equation predicting participation in civil society. (Rural-urban is the stronger of the two.) The configuration of civil society in the Thai case, then, is composed of older, lower status people, primarily from rural areas.

Orientations Toward Corruption and the Rule of Law

A recent survey conducted by the National Statistical Office of Thailand shows a relatively high level of belief in government corruption. Roughly 40.4 percent of respondents believe

that there is a great deal of corruption in the government sector. This perception varies dramatically by region. 51.4 percent of Bangkok respondents believe that there is a great deal of corruption in government, while the other regions are clustered between 35-43 percent (National Statistical office, 2003: 5).

Contrary to these perceptions, however, the level of corruption actually *experienced* by Thais is relatively low. Of respondents in this survey, only 16.9 percent indicated being a personal witness to corruption or bribery. One explanation of this finding is that respondents have very different ideas about the meaning of bribery and corruption. Table 9 presents responses to a variety of actions, indicating how respondents view these activities.

Table 9: Respondent Identifications of Actions in Terms of Bribery or Corruption (in Percent) N = 1546

	<u>Gift</u>	<u>Bribery</u>	<u>Corruption</u>	<u>N</u>
Politicians give money or gifts to people during an election	10.7	76.2	13.0	1406
Gave donations to government officials during a celebration	39.2	53.3	7.4	1344
“Tipped” a government official for assistance	12.8	66.5	20.6	1318
Employment depends on friends or relatives in government	*	39.0	40.6	1256

* 20.4 percent indicated that this practice was “not bad.”

The data in Table 9 indicate a strong identification of such practices with bribery or corruption. Over 80 percent characterize gifts by politicians and tipping government officials as one or the other. 79.6 percent view nepotism as a form of bribery or corruption.

The data seem persuasive that the lack of experience with bribery or corruption is not a function of different definitions of what constitutes these acts.

There are, however, systematic differences in experiences of corruption related to other factors. Table 10 indicates that Bangkok and suburban Bangkok residents record higher experiences of bribery and corruption than persons in other parts of Thailand, particularly those in rural areas.

Table 10: Personal Experiences of Corruption by Urban-Rural Settings (in Percent) N = 1536

	<u>Muang</u>	<u>Suburbs</u>	<u>Rural</u>	<u>Suburban Bangkok</u>	<u>BKK</u>	<u>Total</u>
Personally never witnessed corruption	79.9	83.1	84.5	78.2	76.1	83.1
Have witnessed corruption personally	20.1	16.9	15.5	21.8	23.9	16.9

Personal experiences of corruption have substantial impacts on overall perceptions of governmental corruption. Perceptions of corruption in government are in a minority, but they are clearly influenced by the urban and rural environments in which respondents are located (Table 10).⁹ The percent of Bangkok and suburban Bangkok residents in our survey indicating a belief that either “most public officials are corrupt” or “almost all public officials are corrupt” is significantly larger than respondents from non-Bangkok areas. Either there is more corruption experienced in the Bangkok area, as indicated in Table 10, or the perceptions of corruption are remarkably different. The latter is a less likely explanation, as there are no significant differences by urban-rural location in how such actions are evaluated.

⁹ These data are supported by a National Statistical Office Survey indicating that less than 15 percent believe that

Support for the Rule of Law

When the focus shifts to the rule of law, the commitment of Thais to “liberal democracy” is more ambiguous (See Appendix 1). Table 11 shows a lack of commitment to the priority of law over personalism and political processes in several dimensions. Majorities in most cases support governmental authority over rules, laws and procedures. Only in the case of minority views is there a counter to majoritarian democracy, and this is largely due to Thai sensitivity to the conditions of other citizens. In times of emergency, such constraints seem to fade.

Correspondingly, support for the rule of law is associated with an urban orientation, rather than a rural one and the more religious a person is, the less likely they are to support values of “liberal democracy” (Table 12). The level of education

Table 11: Commitment to the Rule of Law and Support for Minority Rights (Percent)

	<u>Strongly Agree</u>	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Disagree</u>	<u>Strongly Disagree</u>
If country is in difficulty it is OK to disregard laws	17.3	38.5	32.0	12.3
Government should decide what can be discussed	19.1	34.3	26.1	20.5
Judges should defer to the executive	21.5	38.2	26.0	14.3
Legislatures interfere with government	14.0	37.7	33.1	15.2
Political leaders should be able to ignore procedures	17.3	38.5	32.0	12.3
With support, leaders should ignore minority views	12.3	28.3	36.4	23.0

has no significant impact on respect for the constraints of law. Rather, such support appears rooted primarily in the cultures of rural and urban society.

either government officials or local officials are “mostly corrupt” (National Statistical Office, 2003: 6).

Again, this complexity enhances the concept of widely differing views of democracy between urban and rural Thais. In addition, the role of traditional 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 urban and rural societies.

Table 12: Sources of Support for the Rule of Law (N=1366)

Variables	Regression Coefficient	Standardized Coefficient	t-value	Sig. of t
Modernism	-.125	-.161	-6.131	.000
Frequency of religious activity	-.162	-.088	-3.397	.001
Urban location	.894	.307	11.547	.000
Years of education	-.024	-.031	-1.105	.269

R = .352

Conclusion

Overall evaluation of Thai democracy is not without controversy. The positive side includes significant increases in voter participation, party voting based on some facsimile of party platforms, a reduction in the number of parties in the House, and, ultimately, a single party majority that has the capacity to provide government stability through a full term in office. In addition, high levels of popular support for the Constitution of 1997 and the Electoral Commission reinforce the view that Thailand has taken a major step forward in developing democratic elections. Judgments that “political reform had completely failed” or that “this (House elections) was the dirtiest and most expensive election in Thai history” are clearly hyperbole, if not an outright absurdity. Our view is

that elections in Thailand represent a truly remarkable step forward for democratic governance in Thailand.

The test of electoral democracy in Thailand, so far, appears to be whether one is willing to see the glass half full or half empty. We tend to view the trend in developing democratic elections as highly positive. The continuing revision of election procedures based upon experience bears out such a view. The road to democratization is neither short, nor smooth. Perhaps more positive appraisals of what the public believes to be significant accomplishments will help those struggling with developing democracy to stay the course.

There are, of course, areas where Thai democracy requires development in order to consolidate. Above all, ranking perhaps even ahead of a battle against corruption of government, is the ability to rely on law to govern society and to protect citizens of the Thai nation. Clearly these latter two go hand in hand. *A luta continua* (the struggle continues).

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APPENDIX 1

Definitions of Variables Used in the Analysis

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

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

Modernism: Sum of scores on the following questions

- 1 obedience to parents even when they are unreasonable
2. hiring preferences for friends and relatives
3. give way in conflict with a neighbor
4. give way in opinions if co-workers disagree
5. family needs take precedence over those of individual
6. male loses face to work under female supervisor
7. elders should be consulted to resolve disputes
8. husbands should persuade daughters-in-law to obey mother

Religious Devotion: 9-point scale from “practically never” to “several times a day.”

Commitment to the Rule of Law and Pluralist Democracy: sum of scores from strongly agree to strongly disagree on the following questions:

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 computed when variances of questions differ.

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