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**The State of Democracy in Thailand**

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# **The State of Democracy in Thailand**

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Most scholars agree that consolidation of democracy requires mass approval in order to sustain this form of government. Even overwhelming support for democracy among peoples of developing nations, however, cannot guarantee democracy in the face of determined elites who have access to instruments of military power (Linz and Stepan, 2001). The military, after fifteen years of democracy, overturned a democratically-elected government in Thailand on September 19, 2006, as in 1991, on the pretext of “corruption in government.” Whether “corruption” warranted such a drastic remedy has yet to be determined,<sup>1</sup> but what is clear is that the Thai aristocracy is still willing to sacrifice democracy when they find control of government slipping from their grasp.

The aristocracy was 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 activities of Thaksin Shinawatra, deposed Prime Minister - all measures that far exceeded actions for which the Thaksin regime was severely criticized. The bankroller for the so-called People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD), Sondhi Limtongkul, argued that suppression of individual rights should be acceptable in order to rid the government of all remaining vestiges of the Thaksin regime. Although a semblance of democracy was restored after

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

elections in 2007, the new regime is governed by a constitution drafted, essentially, by a junta-appointed drafting committee, adopted in a popular referendum.<sup>2</sup>

Although a small majority endorsed the new constitutional draft, it passed with less than 60 percent support, furthered by army coercion outside Bangkok plus the threat that if it did not pass, the junta-appointed government would continue to govern. The latter threat was a compelling reason for many voters who wearied of constraints on media communication and the imposition of martial law in much of the countryside outside Bangkok. Even so, the Northeastern Region, the largest rural population area in Thailand, rejected the Constitution of 2007.

Explanations of sources of the coup are controversial and complex. Our analysis, however, argues that support for the coup is rooted in historical and cultural factors dating to the overthrow of the absolute Thai monarchy in 1932 (Albritton and Bureekul, 2008). Consequently, this paper approaches the evaluation of Thai democracy in two ways. First, it offers an evaluation of the “quality” of Thai democracy at the time of the coup, as defined by Diamond and Molino (2008). This discussion helps to ascertain the status of democracy at the time of the coup and allows inferences as to the justification of such an extreme remedy for whatever problems might have plagued the Thai polity. Next, the paper addresses long-standing cleavages in Thai society and culture that play themselves out in conflicts between the traditional Thai aristocracy and Thai mass publics, offering insights into the sudden turn away from democracy after a fifteen-year period of consolidation, as well as prospects for the future of democracy in Thailand.

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<sup>2</sup> Once again, the anti-government movements have taken to the streets against constitutional revision. Although initial draft revisions were defeated in the Parliament, the anti-government movements now demand resignation of the government itself. The conflict is clearer, now, with anti-government speeches alluding to “the defence of the monarchy, alleging that the constitutional amendments would subvert and overthrow the traditional pillars of the Thai state.” (Thitinan Pongsudhirak, Bangkok Post, 5/30/2008)

What does the furor in the streets portend for Thai democracy? Diamond and Molino suggest that in order for a nation to be considered a “democracy,” there must be: “1) universal adult suffrage; 2) recurring free, competitive, and fair elections; 3) more than one serious political party; 4) alternative sources of information;” and 5) formal, democratic institutions unconstrained by powers that are not directly accountable to the people.<sup>(3)</sup> Any reasonable and fair assessment of Thai polity and politics indicates that Thailand more than met all of these requirements, except during the period of dominance by the military regime from the time of the junta, beginning in September 2006, until 2008, when a newly elected government was installed.<sup>3</sup> This means that for at least fifteen years, Thailand met all Diamond and Molino’s minimum requirements for democracy.

There are, of course, many ways of defining a “quality” democracy, but Diamond and Molino appear to define it as rooted primarily in the “degree of customer satisfaction with it, regardless of how it is produced or its actual content.”<sup>(4)</sup> This is a reasonable measure of democracy; government “by the people” should result in satisfaction of the people above all else. Diamond and Molino then identify eight dimensions on which democracies vary, five of which are procedural (rule of law, participation, competition, and both vertical and horizontal accountability). There are two additional dimensions that are primarily substantive: respect for civil and political freedoms, and progressive implementation of greater political, social, and economic equality. <sup>(5)</sup>

No single poll addresses all the indicators of these dimensions, but two nationwide polls of Thai attitudes toward democracy (Asian Barometer, 2002 and 2006)

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<sup>3</sup> During the abortive parliamentary elections of 2006, our poll showed that 77.9 percent of respondents considered the elections essentially free and fair.

occurred approximately one year after the first government under the Constitution of 1997 began to govern and in April-May 2006, just four months prior to the coup, shed light on the status of progress toward democracy and public opinion at the time of the coup. Although we compare data across the two polls, it is important to be aware that the 2006 poll was taken in the midst of ongoing social tensions leading to the military takeover of government. Keeping this context in mind, we are in a position to ask about political conditions that may have led to, or even justified a coup. In essence, we are asking about public perceptions of the quality of democracy just prior to the coup and, whatever the conditions, attempting to understand the overthrow of a democratically elected government in a society overwhelmingly committed to belief in democratic government.

### **Commitment to Democracy**

The data in Table 1 indicate clear commitments of Thai respondents to democracy as they experience it in Thailand. Both in 2002 and 2006, satisfaction with democracy is very high. Even under conditions of social and political tension leading to the coup, 83.8 percent expressed satisfaction with the way democracy works in Thailand. Even more remarkable, however, is the fact that just four months prior to the coup, 81.8 percent expressed satisfaction with the Thaksin government.

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**Table 1: Satisfactions with and Commitments to Democracy, 2002 and 2006, N=1546**

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	<b>2002</b>	<b>2006</b>
<b>Percent satisfied or very satisfied with the way democracy works in Thailand</b>	<b>90.5</b>	<b>83.8</b>
<b>Percent satisfied or very satisfied with the Thaksin regime</b>	<b>89.5</b>	<b>81.8</b>

<b>Mean rating of democracy under the present government (1-10 scale)</b>	<b>8.22</b>	<b>7.48</b>
<b>Mean score on desire for democracy (1-10 scale)</b>	<b>9.33</b>	<b>8.75</b>
<b>Mean score on “suitability” of democracy for Thailand (1-10 scale)</b>	<b>8.31</b>	<b>8.75</b>

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Even by April-June of 2006, the data indicate high levels of “consumer satisfaction” with the status of democracy in Thailand. These levels of commitment to democracy are based on indicators of the quality of democracy as Diamond and Molino suggest. Here, however, it is important to note that the relevant data come from the later poll, 2006, taken just a few months before democratic government was suppressed by a military and bureaucratic coup.

### **Quality of Democracy**

A similar poll, taken in 2005 at the time of parliamentary elections, shows high evaluations of the government in a variety of policy areas. Table 2 shows that over 70 percent of respondents rated government performance as “good” or “very good” in every category. The highest ratings are found in the health care sector. This is probably a consequence of the very popular program creating access to health care for 30 Baht (approximately \$.30), a very low cost to the consumer. The program is so popular that virtually all politicians applaud it, and the major opposition party actually urged that the cost be reduced to zero, as a strategy to trump the popularity of the leading political party, the People’s Power Party. The junta-led government then adopted the zero-cost proposal.

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**Table 2: Ratings of Government Policy Performance (by percent), 2005, N=2000**

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	<b>Very bad</b>	<b>Bad</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>Very good</b>
<b>Economy</b>	<b>0.6</b>	<b>12.6</b>	<b>63.7</b>	<b>23.2</b>
<b>Education</b>	<b>1.3</b>	<b>13.5</b>	<b>67.8</b>	<b>17.5</b>
<b>Employment</b>	<b>2.0</b>	<b>22.8</b>	<b>62.0</b>	<b>13.2</b>
<b>Poverty</b>	<b>3.3</b>	<b>24.3</b>	<b>55.8</b>	<b>16.7</b>
<b>Health care</b>	<b>1.1</b>	<b>9.6</b>	<b>62.4</b>	<b>26.9</b>
<b>Crime</b>	<b>3.6</b>	<b>16.0</b>	<b>59.6</b>	<b>20.9</b>
<b>Traffic safety</b>	<b>2.1</b>	<b>17.7</b>	<b>67.7</b>	<b>12.5</b>
<b>Environment</b>	<b>2.6</b>	<b>19.3</b>	<b>66.9</b>	<b>11.2</b>

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Returning to the 2006 poll, the data show other positive evaluations of government performance. Table 3 offers general evaluations of the quality of democracy in areas of equality and, most importantly, civil liberties, an area in which freedoms were sharply curtailed during the junta government. The data also present a series of questions concerning the treatment of minorities in Thailand. There appears to be a very high level of support for fairness and equality for these peoples, including basic needs and political rights.

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**Table 3: Evaluations of Equality and Civil Liberties, 2006, (in percent) N=1546**

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	<b>Agree or Strongly Agree</b>
<b>Everyone is treated equally by the government</b>	<b>58.6</b>
<b>Our courts punish the guilty even if they are high-ranking officials</b>	<b>77.7</b>
<b>People have basic necessities like food, clothing, and shelter</b>	<b>90.7</b>
<b>People are free to speak what they think without fear</b>	<b>75.9</b>
<b>People can join any organization they like without fear</b>	<b>74.8</b>
<b>Minority groups should have equal rights to do whatever other citizens do</b>	<b>94.8</b>

<b>Minorities should be able to vote</b>	<b>94.0</b>
<b>Minority interests should be protected like those of other citizens</b>	<b>93.7</b>

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Even more important, given ostensible grounds for the coup, is the perception of corruption only a few months away from the overthrow of a democratically elected government. Table 4 shows not only a low degree of perceptions of government corruption, but also a very low level of personal experience of corruption, even compared to the 2002 poll. Ironically, by 2006, the proportion of respondents believing that “hardly anyone is involved in corruption” doubled, while those expressing a belief that government officials are corrupt declined. In addition, respondents with personal experiences of corruption declined by half (32.4 percent to 16.2 percent). The ostensible reason for the overthrow of a democratically-elected regime was not perceived by the general public, and, in fact, perceptions of government had actually improved, a far different picture from public discourse in the news media.

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**Table 4: Perceptions of Corruption in the Government of Thailand, N=1546**

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	<b>2002</b>	<b>2006</b>
<b>How much corruption and bribery is there in the national government?</b>		
<b>Hardly anyone is involved</b>	<b>7.4</b>	<b>15.0</b>
<b>Not a lot of officials are corrupt</b>	<b>58.3</b>	<b>55.5</b>
<b>Have you personally witnessed an act of corruption or bribe-taking by a politician or government official during the past year</b>	<b>32.4</b>	<b>16.2</b>

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In terms of “consumer satisfaction,” then, the indicators point to a relatively high level of satisfaction with the quality of democracy in Thailand as late as four months before the coup swept aside fifteen years of democratic progress and a highly popular constitution, returning Thailand to a previous system of elite rule. How was it possible to revoke democracy in the face of widespread popular approval of the state of democratic government in Thailand? The answers lie embedded in deeply rooted cultural factors seldom addressed in discussions of Thai democracy. It is to this cultural context that we now turn for evaluating the status of democracy in Thailand today.

### **Does Culture Matter?: Foundations of an Inegalitarian Society**

Most analyses of democracy as it exists in Thailand use traditional templates to evaluate democratic systems throughout the world. These include free and fair elections, active political competition, and even basic civil liberties. Questions of equality are generally considered as economic dimensions and are relegated to criteria associated with “substantive democracy.” Underlying pictures painted by indicators of these variables, at least in the Thai case, however, is a centuries-old culture based on fundamental inequalities, not explicitly of wealth, but of status derived from proximity to the monarchy.

The intricacies of what is called the “sakhina” system are too complex to be addressed here. Its crude translation refers to a place of honor derived from control of land, essentially land bestowed by the king. More recently, it has come to mean honor as a function of “place” or status. Thai society is organized around the hierarchical system of “place” in which everyone knows to pay proper respect to “superiors” as a function of age, education, occupation, and other cues, such as respect for monastics, and persons

associated, however remotely, with the historic monarchy, who constitute a significant portion of leadership in government, the media, and universities, particularly in Bangkok. The key concept for Thais, as formulated by M.R. Kukrit Pramoj, who was largely responsible for restoring the *sakdhina* system during the 1950s, after its undermining in the overthrow of the absolute monarchy, is “Know thy place,” meaning that citizens should accept the status to which they are born and to be content with it.

The ideology of “place” was elevated as a characteristic of national identity by Pramoj, intellectual leader in the revival of the monarchy under the authoritarian national leader Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat. Contrary to the liberal ideology of the 1932 overthrow of the monarchy that the nation and its sovereignty belong to the people, the concept of “*sakdhina*” promotes an ideology based upon the notion that all beneficence flows from the monarchy, all liberties – and even democracy – are granted to the people by the king, and the social structure rightly divides people into hierarchical classes according to their birthright (Sattayanurak, 2007).<sup>4</sup>

This understanding of fundamental Thai identity as “*sakdhina*” has been established by government-supported intellectuals and propagated through the media and the governmentally controlled school system. Virtually all Thais are socialized into this view of identity in which their status or “place” is given to them by birth. Reinforcement of this ideology comes by means of several rituals, including the traditional form of greeting, the “*wai*,” in which the “inferior” initiates the traditional greeting to which the “superior” may or may not respond. Sattayanurak suggests that this internalization of inequality prevails because the Thai media and education system have not been reformed

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<sup>4</sup> The description of “*sakdhina*” in this paper comes from the doctoral dissertation of Saichol Sattayanurak, which is in press. The chapter, “The Construction of Mainstream Thought on ‘Thainess’ and the ‘Truth’ Constructed by ‘Thainess’” was translated by Sarinee Achavanuntakul.

to express an ideology characterized by equality, in which there would be a social space for all groups of people to attain justice and freedom to live a dignified life.(p.1) What is important for political analysis, however, is the realization that the course of democracy in Thailand cannot properly be understood apart from how the “sakdhina system” qualifies almost every aspect of democratic discourse.<sup>5</sup>

The overall ideology of sakdhina has several implications that profoundly structure Thai attitudes towards politics and government:

1. The king controls the government’s use of power. This premise creates a dichotomy between “government” and “administration.” The former may be democratically elected; however, elected governments come and go, but the bureaucracy is the one constant in the Thai polity. A corollary is that because the king is the moral compass of the nation, there is no need for democratic political structures, such as parliaments or checks and balances mechanisms to supervise the government’s use of power, as long as there is a king. In this view, democratic institutions are of secondary consequence, as the king will insure that the government does not abuse its authority. In fact, it is appropriate for the king to obstruct any activity seen as governmental abuse of power. (Sattayanurak, 22)

2. Sattayanurak argues that part of the propaganda restoring the sanctity of the royal institution was a belief in the correctness of an unequal social structure, in which “people have no political right or freedom to participate in any decision-making process about the use of resources and checks-and-balance mechanisms.....there is no need for democratic institutions (such as the parliament or independent organizations) to supervise

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<sup>5</sup> When one of the authors asked two educated Thai adults whether Thais believed that “we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all people are created equal,” the response was, essentially, “absolutely not.”

the government's use of power, because Thailand has the king to supervise the government, to ensure that it will not abuse or misuse its authority." (21) A good democracy is an elite guided society, defined as a society "without politics."

Only when a ruler can be free from politics, defined as struggles over power and interests, can there be a "good" society. Ills that afflict the Thai nation are due to "politics;" therefore, "non-political" institutions, such as the bureaucracy, the military, and, most explicitly, the monarchy, are, in principle, above politics. Part of the socialization process is perpetuation of a belief that "Thais do not want political freedom to demand rights relating to natural resources, and they also feel that such freedom will cause chaos. Therefore, what they demand is a decisive and strong (ruler), not a strong civil society." (Sattayanurak, 25)

3. Order is preferable to freedom. Whenever someone disrupts order (defined as disrupting the "know thy place" principle), the ruler is entitled to use violent means to suppress that disruption. This principle, perhaps more than the others, helps to interpret the process of coups and counter-coups that, until 2006, seemed to be a thing of the past.

This ideology has corrupted traditional understandings of political democracy in Thailand. The concept of *sakdhina* clearly elevates the position of a hierarchical aristocracy at the expense of traditional instruments of democracy, such as prime ministers and parliaments. In this understanding, the importance is not in having democratic institutions, but in having "good people" to administer the government. Because the masses do not have the competence to criticize government policies, critics of the government must focus on moral deficiencies. This means that a strong leader, even a dictatorship, is not "bad" government, as long as the leader is "moral" and can be

seen as working for the best interests of the people. One consequence of this view is that the king must be seen as “good” and free from criticism over public affairs; another is that most political parties conduct campaigns that are not presentations of policy alternatives, but highly personalized in terms of the “worthiness” of party leaders.

Guardians of the “sakdhina” system work assiduously to ensure that government in Thailand is weak. One problem for the aristocracy with the 1997 constitution was that it encouraged strong party government. Truly strong government threatens the autonomy of the bulwarks of the aristocracy – the monarchy, the military, and the bureaucracy. Thaksin Shinawatra also began to assert authority over military promotions and interfered with this bastion guarding a system dominated by historic elites, whereas previously these matters were left to military insiders. Finally, he began to assert political authority over the bureaucracy, particularly the Ministry of Interior, and the bureaucratic polity, the most stable instrument of Thai governance, would not go quietly. Above all, Thaksin’s threat to the old system was that he assumed sovereignty derived from the people, apparently forgetting the hallmark of Thai governance that “the king controls the government’s use of power.” (Sattayanurak, 20)

Contrary to many nations in which the middle class is the engine of democracy, the middle class of Thailand represents two fundamentally divergent interests: 1) an emerging class of entrepreneurs who have difficulty responding to rapid social and economic change in Thai society consistent with a hierarchical social order, and 2) an aristocracy associated with the traditional social hierarchy from which they benefit. The latter find themselves at odds with rural masses, unless they are compliant enough to become politically quiescent, allowing the right of place to guide them through politics.

As one representative of sakdhina-guided intellectuals put it, “The problem with Thaksin is that he mobilized the poor and got them involved in politics; and the problem with that is that the poor vote differently from the middle class.”<sup>6</sup>

The struggle between elites and democrats also takes shape as conflicts between Bangkok and the hinterland. Political dimensions of this cleavage 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 and 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.

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)

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<sup>6</sup> Thirayuth Boonmi, quoted in the Bangkok Post, 3/12/2006.

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 who view the traditional order as threatened, the upper class, the mass media, and even academics – many, if not most of whom are deeply committed philosophically and otherwise to *sakdhina* -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 greater 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 the Bangkok aristocracy, 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.<sup>7</sup>

The ethos of “sakhidina” spills over into the ability to establish the rule of law in Thailand. Hierarchy of status produces quite different outcomes in civil and criminal law. Persons of high status, even when convicted of serious crimes, rarely serve prison

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<sup>7</sup> In some respects, “Bangkok” is a marker for the core city including the suburbs. In fact, suburban Bangkok (or the Central Region) is even more linked to aristocratic views than the city, itself.

sentences. When the son of a powerful politician, Chalerm Yubamrung, shot and killed a policeman in full view of bar patrons, he was spared any serious sentence and, today serves as a deputy minister in the current government. In addition, no serious efforts to bring justice to perpetrators of high level assassination, such as the killing by police of a lawyer who attempted to defend Muslims accused of terrorist activities in southern Thailand. Much of the lack of serious law enforcement or judicial justice relates directly to the system of deference required under “sakdhina.”<sup>8</sup>

But it would be a mistake to view this threat primarily in terms of class or even regional struggle. It is more fundamentally a struggle between aristocrats seeking to defend the sakdhina system and emerging impacts of new ways of thinking about fundamental social structures.

### **Empirical Evidence of the “Sakdhina” System**

Because the sakdhina system is virtually unique to Thailand, few public opinion polls include questions that measure adherence to a highly structured class system not directly related to economic structures. A national poll conducted in 2005 at the time of parliamentary elections, however offers a clue to the role of sakdhina in supporting military coups against elected governments, as well as the role of Bangkok as the guardian of the sakdhina system.

Examining responses on a 1 to 10 point scale of differences between Bangkok and the rest of Thailand on the question “Even if a government is democratically elected, if it is corrupt, the military should intervene to improve the situation,” an ANOVA reveals no differences in means. When the distributions in each category are examined, however, the

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<sup>8</sup> See article by Jonathan Head, BBC News, 4/7/08. Head relates the “untouchability” of Thai elites to their wealth, but this connection is more associated with sakdhina status. (Of course, sakdhina status and wealth are not uncorrelated.)

non-Bangkok portion of the sample exhibits a relatively normal distribution, but Bangkok respondents are highly polarized with 44.6 percent responding “Strongly Agree” and 34.8 percent responding “Strongly Disagree.” In other words, nearly 80 percent of respondents locate themselves at the most extreme ends of the scale.

A question that measures adherence to norms of an elite-guided society evokes a similar response. When respondents are asked whether they agree or disagree (10 pt. scale) with the statement “People with high education should have more influence in politics than low or non-educated people,” 63.8 percent of Bangkok residents fall into category 10, “Strongly Agree,” while only 29.9 percent of non-Bangkok residents identify with this category. Table 6 helps to put in perspective the complex relationships among attitudes and opinions that are involved in the continuing conflict between elites and masses in Thailand:

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**Table 5: Regression of Support for Military Action Against Democratically Elected Governments: “Even if a government is democratically elected, if it is corrupt, the military should intervene to set things right.”**

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<u>Variable</u>	<u>Reg. Coeff.</u>	<u>Beta</u>	<u>Sig. of t</u>
<b>Education</b>	<b>-.170</b>	<b>-.090</b>	<b>.000</b>
<b>People with high education should have more influence in politics than low or non-educated people</b>	<b>.198</b>	<b>.170</b>	<b>.000</b>
<b>People who have bad reputations cannot do well in politics</b>	<b>.060</b>	<b>.061</b>	<b>.007</b>
<b>Constant</b>	<b>4.638</b>		<b>.000</b>
<b>R-square = .046</b>			

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It is important to note that people with higher levels of education are significantly

opposed to military intervention. In fact, there is no association between level of education and the belief that more highly educated people should have more influence in politics, so issues of collinearity can be ruled out. On the other hand, a second attitudinal variable, attitude of respondents who draw a moralistic connection between reputation and political leadership, tends to support resort to a coup. This variable is consistent with a sakdhina view of Thai politics and society in which the issue is always, primarily, the “morality” of those who govern rather than the policies they follow.

Because the level of education defining an interest group or class is independent of the attitude that more highly educated persons are more fit to govern, there is a reasonable inference that this view arises from a different form of socialization than one based in traditional class or status dimensions. It is, however, consistent with the ideology of sakdhina, and one that largely supports an aggressive role for the military to bring down even democratically elected governments when necessary to restore “order” in the sense of adherence to an inegalitarian ideology now being contested, as the conflicting ideology of democracy has expanded among the people of Thailand. Whether democracy can survive against a deeply rooted culture of inequality remains to be seen, but this conflict will be the decisive factor in the future of Thai democracy.

### **Conclusion**

This analysis brings in “culture” as the way of understanding the state of democracy in Thailand. In effect, it posits a culture war as the key to the struggle for democracy. In conventional analyses of democracy in Thailand, the data, even as the coup bringing fifteen years of democracy to an end was imminent, indicate a very high level of support for democracy, support for civil liberties, and a high level of satisfaction with the

democratically elected government. Lurking beneath this confident picture, however, was an aristocratic ideology, in place at least since the 1950s, fundamentally at odds with the development of democracy or its continued consolidation.

This ideology, commonly called “sakdhina,” is based upon the premise that Thais are by no means born to citizenship as equals. To the contrary, it holds that citizens are born to a specific status in life and that the key to the good society is that everyone “knows their place.”<sup>9</sup> Sakdhina, however, is not really similar to a caste system. It is not based upon ethnic, religious, or specifically cultural characteristics. Furthermore, it represents a constructed identity of “Thainess” in which all rank and status is related to proximity to the monarchy and, unlike the Indian caste system, does not privilege persons of lesser rank. It is, nevertheless, an identity to which Thais are socialized from early years, specifically in the educational system, but also in public rituals. The power of this socialization process, now extending over 50 years, cannot be underestimated.

Sakdhina is also designed to limit political space, especially to ordinary people in two ways: first, by defining the political arena as immoral in nature because it represents an area of contention and conflict of interests; second, by reducing the space of political participation, so that government is left to the appropriate instruments of the monarchy – the military and the bureaucracy. This allows concentrations of political power in the central government, specifically in Bangkok. One example of the growing struggle between the Bangkok aristocracy which defends sakdhina and the rural populations in the hinterland is the opposition by the central government to decentralization, especially when it includes devolutions of authority to the local level. Efforts to decentralize

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<sup>9</sup> Prawas Wasi, noted national moralist, in a public speech attended by one of the authors stated that “The problem with Thais is that they aspire too much. They should go back to plant their rice fields and be happy.”

authority have been systematically thwarted by the Ministry of the Interior, whose administrative structure makes it virtually impervious to political control.

As democracy has flourished, political power has begun to transfer to rural populations who constitute an overwhelming majority in Thailand. When rural citizens count as much as urban elites (as they inevitably do in a democratic system) elites feel threatened by prospects of rapid social changes, most specifically in the privileges afforded them in a hierarchical society. One compelling bit of evidence in support of this view is the fact that education which, presumably, defines an elite class of one dimension, is not associated with support for a military coup even if corruption is evident.

Respondents who believe that more highly educated people should have more say in government, however, strongly support military intervention if they are persuaded that the government is “immoral” on some dimension. In this context, charges of “corruption” become highly politicized in the context of the *sakdhina* system. For a substantial portion of the Thai middle class aristocracy, especially royalist sympathizers, academics, the media and other intellectuals who benefit from this hierarchical system, the question is whether they will accept the choice of governors by the masses, if the result is government by people of whom they disapprove. In 2006, these groups manipulated the instruments of power and authority to say that the masses should not be free to choose those who would govern them. Now, the stirrings of anti-democratic sentiments against a popularly elected government have begun again.

Popular democracy or even “liberal democracy” is difficult to sustain when confronted with a highly mobilized aristocracy controlling the instruments of force. Sustaining democracy confronts even more difficulties when it struggles against a culture

that promotes inequality as the foundation of the society. When the cultural basis of a nation is inherently undemocratic, can democracy be possible? As one analyst framed the issue in a very recent column, “This fight has always been about the heart and soul of Thailand, but now it is in the open.” (Thitinan Pongsudhirak, Bangkok Post, 5/30/2008) The state of democracy in Thailand hinges on how this struggle between the aristocrats and the masses plays out.

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