
A political society, 1970s onwards

The massive economic and social changes begun in the American era spilled into politics over the last quarter of the 20th century.

After 1976, the senior bureaucracy, palace, and military still clung to the model of a passive rural society that accepted the hierarchical social and political order, and that needed to be protected against both communism and capitalism. The generals and bureaucratic elite laid plans to engineer social harmony and guide 'democracy' from above. But economically and culturally, the country was rapidly becoming more urban than rural, more dominated by business than bureaucracy, and more assertive than passive. The paternalist vision was swept away by the advance of industrialization, urbanization, and globalization, and the growth of mass society.

Through the 1980s, business politicians inside the parliamentary system, and a new 'civil society' outside it, pushed the military back towards the barracks, but reluctantly, slowly, and incompletely. An attempt to halt this trend during 1991–92 proved to be a critical transition. Thereafter, the military's role declined steeply. Political spaces widened. High expectations arose for wide-reaching changes aided by the forces of globalization and the new assertiveness in parts of mass society. The political forces that prioritized the well-being of society and nation seemed set to flourish in the broader political space. But the traditions of the strong dictatorial state had been deeply embedded. When big business and a rural-based populism made a bid to sweep away the old bureaucrat-dominated state, it unleashed a conflict that brought the military back to the front line and placed both liberal democracy and economic growth in peril.

NATIONAL IDEOLOGY AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

The violence of October 1976 was an immense shock. It violated the official self-image of a peaceable and progressive nation. In the aftermath, the National Security Council, a policy-making body founded in the Cold

War era, began to seek ways to 'create unity between the people in the nation . . . so that people are of one heart'.¹ The Council's academic advisers concluded that the old triad of 'nation, religion, and king' was no longer 'stimulating' for a society that had changed so rapidly in the previous generation. Thailand needed a 'national identity' to overcome the polarized politics of the 1970s, and a 'national ideology' that could capture aspirations for progress, as communism had done for many people in recent years.

This project concluded that the new touchstone would be 'nation, religion, monarchy, and democracy with the King as head of state'. In practice, this differed from the old formula in two ways. First, the monarchy would assume a much more prominent role as the focus of national loyalties in comparison to the other two components of the old trinity. Second, democracy was added in recognition that the 1973–76 era had revealed aspirations for liberty, participation, and self-expression that were too powerful to suppress. The 'national ideology' was not publicly promoted like Pancasila in Indonesia, but was 'an instrument of the national leaders . . . to use with the masses in order to produce change in the required direction'.² In the late 1970s, a National Culture Commission and National Identity Office (NIO) were established. New magazines and radio programmes were launched to implement the project.

From research, the National Security Council found that the peasantry, estimated to be 80 per cent of the population, honoured the monarchy and religion, and had no interest in politics. It concluded that they needed a reasonable livelihood and paternal officials to look after them. A book on Thailand published by the NIO in 1984 pictured Thai society as a pyramid, essentially unchanged since the Sukhothai era. At the top was the king; next came the bureaucracy created when 'the king found it impossible to manage the nation's affairs single-handedly'; and at the base were peasants living in unchanging, peaceful villages 'where democracy is practised in its purest form'.³

The Interior Ministry embarked on 'political education' to prepare the people for 'democracy'. Its own research studies concluded that the Thai people were not ready for democracy because of poor upbringing, an innate lack of ethics or seriousness, or simply a 'disposition to be under the command of others'. These findings justified education programmes to inculcate the national ideology and the duties of citizenship, not rights and freedoms. The NIO defined 'Thai-style democracy' as good government that respected the (undefined) rights and aspirations of the people and hence could rival communism for popular appeal. It would be achieved by 'good people', rather than by representative institutions.

The phrase 'democracy with the King as head of state' had appeared in earlier constitutions. Now it became standard. History was adjusted to reflect this close association between the monarchy and Thailand's progress towards democracy. In 1980, a statue of King Prajadhipok was completed outside the new parliament building. The project had been mooted much earlier, but funded only in the aftermath of 1976. The statue expressed in solid form a history in which Prajadhipok ushered in democracy by granting the constitution on 10 December 1932. In this revisionist version, the People's Party's revolution had been a rushed mistake that resulted in fascist militarism and communism. The statue was inscribed with words from Prajadhipok's 1935 abdication statement in which he refused to cede power 'to any individual or any group to use it in an autocratic manner'. The monarchy thus became the fount of democracy.

POLITICAL SOLDIERS AND 'PREMOCRACY', 1980-88

The military assumed the major responsibility for realizing this paternalist vision of the nation and its political future.

The coup of 6 October 1976 returned the army to power. With a record now stretching back four decades with only two short intermissions, the military domination of politics was deeply embedded. But the impact of the massive US patronage – and then its removal – was unsettling in many ways. The number of generals had rapidly increased (to over a thousand), creating intense competition at the top. From the 1930s to the 1950s, the First Army had managed politics through its ability to control the streets of Bangkok, but now there were several centres of power in the armed forces. The counter-insurgency had increased the size and status of the provincial armies, and of new technical and strategic offices at the centre (like the ISOC). In addition, fighting a political war had politicized the army, especially the middle-level officer cadre. In army journals, different groups debated why the army was fighting a war against its own people and how to oppose communism by *political* means.

Politicized groups of mid-ranked officers gained influence because their direct control over men and firepower was critical in the power plays among rival generals. The *Khana thahan num*, dubbed the 'Young Turks', was a group of around 90 middle-level officers who came together in the early 1970s and became prominent in the coup politics at the end of the decade. Most had been trained by the Americans and seen combat in Vietnam. They were not only fiercely anti-communist (several were involved in the 6 October repression) but also fiercely anti-capitalist. They viewed the

peasantry as 'the producers and backbone of the nation' and believed communism had prospered because 'the capitalists take too much advantage... these capitalists are destroying the nation, the institutions... destroying everything, not only causing misery for the people'.⁴ They distrusted parliament because businesspeople could manipulate elections. They believed the military had the right and the duty to control the state in order to manage these social divisions. They were distressed by the army's fall in status in 1973, which they attributed to corrupt relationships between businesspeople and generals such as Thanom and Praphat. Because of their command over Bangkok troops, they were instrumental in the successful coups of 1976 and 1977.

The *Thahan prachathippatai* or Democratic Soldiers came mostly from the ISOC or the general staff. They had been involved in devising political strategy to counter communism, and been greatly affected by working with CPT defectors, such as Prasert Sapsunthon. Like the Young Turks, they believed that the problem of communism stemmed from capitalism because 'some groups have been able to take advantage and build up monopolistic power which inflicts social injustice and material hardship on the people, creating conditions for war'.⁵ Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, one of the group's leaders, argued: 'What is even worse are all the "influences" which are deep rooted in the rural society... if they are not happy with someone, that one may die, he may get killed'.⁶

The Young Turks revered General Prem Tinsulanond as a 'clean' soldier and helped his rise to the premiership in 1980. But Prem did not depend on them. His rise had also been overseen by King Bhumibol who saw Prem as a soldier on whom the monarchy could rely. Prem did not adhere to the Young Turks' narrow ideology but understood the need to compromise with business as one of the powerful forces in society. In 1981, he took into his Cabinet a soldier and some businessmen whom the Young Turks found objectionable. They launched a coup on 1 April (hence the title 'April Fool's Day coup'), which Prem evaded by escaping to his old garrison base at Khorat in the company of the royal family. Against this combination, the Young Turks surrendered. The leaders were jailed but only temporarily, because Prem believed they might still be a useful source of support. In 1985, they launched another failed coup attempt, after which the leaders were cashiered and the group dissolved.

The Democratic Soldiers were more pliable, and Prem drew on them to plan a 'political offensive' to mop up the remains of communism and manage the return to parliamentary democracy. This strategy was issued during 1980–82 in two orders known as 66/2523 and 60/2525. The state

under military tutelage would remove the basic causes for communism and dissent:

Social injustice must be eliminated at every level, from local to national levels. Corruption and malfeasance in the bureaucracy must be decisively prevented and suppressed. All exploitation must be done away with and the security of the people's life and property provided.⁷

This would be achieved by 'cutting down the monopolistic power of the economic groups' and distributing income more evenly. As in the discussion of national ideology, the policy highlighted 'democracy' and 'popular participation in political activities', but was not committed to full popular representation. The threat of communism still gave the army a 'sacred' duty to rule.

Under Prem's leadership, this strategy of managed democracy stretched from the parliament down to the village. Under a new constitution, parliament was controlled through an appointive Senate packed with military men. With this support and quiet palace backing, Prem remained prime minister for over eight years (1980–88). Other key ministries (defence, interior, finance, foreign) were reserved for military men and a few trusted technocrats. At the same time, parliament was restored, elections were held from 1979 onwards, and other ministries were allotted to elected MPs. Some generals resigned to support Prem in parliament. This arrangement was dubbed semi-democracy or 'Premocracy'.

More government funds were invested in rural uplift to remove the rationale for communism. The Fifth Plan (1981–86) for the first time included greater social and economic equity as an objective on grounds of 'national security'. A poverty programme identified the 12 652 poorest villages (60 per cent in the northeast) and showered them with water supply, roads, schools, irrigation, electrification, and soil improvement. General Chavalit oversaw an *Isan khiao* (Green northeast) scheme under which the army built small irrigation works and other development projects. None of this stemmed the trend to growing inequality. Similarly, the avowed attempt to restrain capital came to little. The Fifth Plan vowed to break up monopolies in banking and industry, but nothing resulted.

The army oversaw a network of propaganda and surveillance, especially in the countryside. The Village Scouts were revived after a short lull. They continued to receive royal patronage and counted 3 million members in the early 1980s. In 1978, the ISOC set up the Thai National Defence Volunteers, which trained and armed around 50 000 villagers to act as informants and vigilantes. The Red Gaurs, rangers, and several other groups operated

alongside. Army radio broadcast propaganda morning and evening from the loudspeakers erected at the centre of every village. Rural activists were quietly dealt with. A deputy head of the ISOC explained later how they operated in these years: 'we had a "hunting unit"'. It was easy. We got a list of communist leaders, then . . . bang! That's it. Then we went home and rested'.⁸

MONARCHY TRANSCENDENT

With the support of Prem and efforts of the National Identity Office, the king's public role in the polity expanded further, in three main aspects. First, in keeping with the rural emphasis and his own interests, the king concentrated increasingly on the 'royal projects' of village uplift. In 1980, the government began to contribute to these projects from the regular budget as part of the overall strategy of rural development. An office was created in the planning board. Top officials in the Irrigation Department were seconded. Six development centres were built at regional palaces. The range of activities expanded from the earlier emphasis on irrigation and hill peoples to encompass rural projects of all kinds. Pictures of the king and other royal family members engaged in these activities figured prominently in the television news.

The king championed the small farmer in the face of accelerating change and growing urbanization. In 1991, he said: 'We do not want to be one of those very advanced countries . . . because if we are a highly advanced country, there is only one way to go: backwards . . . if we use a "poor man's" method of administration, without being too dogmatic about theory, but with the spirit of unity in mind, that is, mutual tolerance, we will have more stability'.⁹ In 1994, he unveiled a scheme to make small farmers totally self-reliant and independent of markets through a mixed and integrated organic farm. Queen Sirikit explained: 'Misunderstandings arise between people in rural areas and the rich, so-called civilized people in Bangkok . . . we try to fill that gap'.¹⁰ In 1984, the NIO dubbed Bhumibol the 'Farmer King' and 'Developer King'.

In the mid-1990s, the king also turned his attention to urban problems, seeking solutions to the problems of flooding in sinking Bangkok, and identifying sites for new highways to unclog the traffic. But the public projection of the king as developer in television and print still focused on his rural role, including testimonials from the beneficiaries of the royal projects.

The second role of the king was as the focus of public ceremonial on an even larger scale than before. The bicentenary of Bangkok was celebrated in 1982, complete with a glittering royal barge procession. Seven hundred years of the Sukhothai king's legendary invention of the Thai alphabet were celebrated a year later. These were followed by the king's fifth cycle (60th birthday) in 1987; the longest reign of any Thai monarch (1988), and of any living monarch in the world (1992); the funeral of the king's mother (1995); the reign's jubilee (1996); the king's sixth cycle (72nd birthday, 1999); the queen's (2004); 60th anniversary of the reign (2006); and the king's seventh cycle (84th birthday, 2011). The monarchy also figured strongly in the Year of Promoting Thai Culture, which the NIO orchestrated in 1994. By the late 1990s, the old city on Rattanakosin Island was a site of almost constant royal celebration. The municipality drew up plans to return the area to its late 18th-century layout, ostensibly to promote tourism, but also to reclaim some sacred space from later intrusions, such as Thammasat University with its connection to the revolution of 1932. Prostration became fashionable again in the court. Any possibility of criticism of the sort that royalty faced in the 1920s was prevented by use of *lèse majesté* laws.

Third, the monarchy was even more strongly associated with orthodox Buddhism. Mass television brought the main events of the royal ritual calendar into the home. The Department of Fine Arts revived interest in the *Traiphum Phra Ruang*, the Sukhothai-era text that justified monarchy and social hierarchy in terms of unequal religious merit. A 1983 conference discussed the text's relevance to contemporary life, government, and 'national security'. The king took an interest in the monastic lineage of Acharn Man Phurithatto, a northeastern monk who had practised intense asceticism and meditation. Acharn Man had died in 1949, and his disciples soon after claimed he had achieved the status of *arahant* or Buddhist saint. Devotees from the upper ranks of business and bureaucracy had begun to patronize his monastic lineage since the 1960s. The king invited surviving members of the lineage to Bangkok, built a retreat for them in the palace grounds, visited the Sakon Nakhon *wat* where Acharn Man had died, and presided over funerary rites for three disciples.

In 1987, a palace *Memoir* of the king published for his fifth cycle noted that, since Sukhothai, the Thai monarch had ruled 'not out of any divine right, but by the consent of his fellow peers', and hence 'a Thai King is judged by the sole criterion of how much benefit and happiness he could bring to the country'.¹¹ The king repeated this theory of spontaneous election in interviews with foreign journalists, suggesting: 'If the people do not want me, they can throw me out, eh?'¹²

The king's birthday speeches and other public addresses attracted more attention and became more like sermons. They constantly returned to the theme of unity and the need for good people to rule the country. At times he showed displeasure at the institutionalized disunity in representative democracy and political party competition: 'between these two sides there is only talk, talk, talk, talk and they argue, argue, argue'.¹³ His aides and courtiers were often more explicit. Tongnoi Tongyai, a royal secretary, claimed that Thailand's constitutions were 'French in foundation and American in ideal'.¹⁴ The NIO echoed that constitutions were 'an alien concept'.¹⁵

In 1995, the king published his own adaptation of one of the traditional *jataka* tales about the previous lives of the Buddha. In the story, Prince Mahajanaka loses his kingdom but then regains it through a test that reveals his magical kingly power. He reigns for thousands of years but then becomes aware of the meaninglessness of wealth and retires to an ascetic life. Bhumibol changed the traditional version by inserting a didactic speech on the theme of perseverance, and by delaying Mahajanaka's retreat to asceticism until he has first weaned his people from destructive acquisitiveness through education and through sustainable development using traditional technology. Mahajanaka explains this is necessary because everyone 'from the horse handlers to the Viceroy, and especially the courtiers are all ignorant'.¹⁶

With the passing of his senior royal advisers (Dhani died in 1974), the king gathered a new cadre who were distinguished not by royal blood but by prominence in modern society. They included soldiers from the Cold War era (notably, Prem), technocrats who shared his view of development and society, business leaders often from the great Thai–Chinese lineages of the late 19th century, and jurists expert on constitutions and legislation.

With his image of devotion to the peasantry, constant ceremonial presence, promotion as the centrepiece of national identity, and increasing longevity, the king's *barami* (charisma, innate authority) steadily increased. With his European upbringing he had begun in the style of the Fourth to Seventh Reigns as a symbol of westernized modernism. But with Dhani's initial urging and thereafter on his own, he had become more a symbol of tradition in the face of change. Under Sarit, this traditionalism had been promoted by military and business in the face of communism, with the king portrayed as the paternal ruler of a nation of loyal and untroublesome peasants. But, as communism declined and the peasantry became both smaller and more truculent, this image lost its power. The new generation of courtiers and royal supporters celebrated the monarch as a modern

thammaracha and a moral counterweight to the excesses of military and business. A book for the 1996 jubilee, *Thailand's Guiding Light*, described the king as a 'beacon of hope... symbol of unity... pillar of stability', working to overcome 'the "forces of greed" represented by the collaboration of unscrupulous private investors, politicians, and public officials'.¹⁷ The monarchy had been reinvented as the hope of a new urban middle class.

In 2005, a bureaucrat-cum-politician published a book, *Phraratcha-amnat* (Royal Powers), claiming that 'The constitution is not above the king in any way... The status of the king does not come under the constitution'.¹⁸ The book argued that the 1932 revolution had failed and 'the Thai people do not yet believe in democratic theory'. The proof lay in the fact that all constitutions had to be signed by the king and in the evidence of great popular veneration for the monarch. The book was widely distributed, and carried by people in public as a political statement.

The 60th anniversary of the reign on 9 June 2006 brought royal commemoration to a new level. Government mandated a year-long celebration. All the world's remaining monarchs were invited, with 25 attending or sending a representative. Celebrations continued with the king's 80th birthday in 2007. Wearing of yellow, the colour associated with Monday, the king's birthday, became a way of publicly displaying loyalty. Whether because of the book or the yellow shirt, the symbolic power of the monarchy had become a factor in the new public politics of the era.

THE BUSINESS OF POLITICS

In their different ways, the mandarin ideologues of the NIO, the political soldiers, and the new royalists imagined the state constraining the rise of business on behalf of a bewildered peasant. Reality was rather different. Once an elective parliament was restored in 1979, businesspeople jumped at the opportunity it presented them. The military's suppression of any form of political organization among peasants or workers delivered the parliament into the hands of commerce. The proportion of Assembly seats occupied by businesspeople rose from one-third in 1979 to two-thirds in 1988.

Three parties dominated through the 1980s: Social Action, Democrat, and Chat Thai (Thai Nation). Each was led by someone with a title signifying old forms of hierarchy: the royal-related Pramoj brothers, Kukrit and Seni, and General Chatichai Choonhavan, respectively. But the financial support and dynamism of these parties came from Bangkok's business

community. Social Action attracted 'modern' businesspeople, often in partnerships with western firms. Chat Thai was centred on the textile industry and other joint ventures with the Japanese. The Democrats were weighted towards agribusiness. The banks, which still dominated the business world, stayed unaligned but also unmatched in influence over all parties.

While Bangkok business initially dominated these parties, over the 1980s it was displaced by provincial business. Ninety per cent of MPs were returned by upcountry constituencies. Local business figures, borne up by the expansion of the provincial economy, gradually claimed these seats, and then also control of the main parties.

Until the 1950s, most provincial towns were administrative centres with populations of a few thousand and only petty commerce. Since the 1960s, they had been transformed – first by the rising cash-crop trade; then in some places by the US spending on its bases; then by government investments in infrastructure (roads, schools) to tie the localities more closely to the nation; and finally by rising demand for transport, retail, services, and entertainment. Some of the successful provincial entrepreneurs came from old noble and bureaucrat families. Many more were second- or third-generation Chinese immigrants. Laws and regulations imposed little restraint on business practices. The biggest profits were often made in areas that straddled the line dividing the legal and the illegal (logging), or that were clearly criminal (smuggling, illegal gambling), or that required official cooperation (contracting, land development). Because such businesses often delivered the highest profits, some of the most prominent local figures were those involved in them. They needed help from local officialdom in the form of protection from the law, advantages over competition, and assistance to overcome bureaucratic and legal barriers. They paid for this aid by sharing some of the profits with officials, but also by supporting the state's campaigns of surveillance and propaganda. Local businesspeople were major supporters of the Village Scouts.

The rising provincial businesspeople grew not only rich but also powerful. They developed close connections with the stratum of village-level traders, contractors, and village heads who served as the channel through which crops and other resources were siphoned out of the villages, and government schemes of patronage and propaganda imposed on them. Through cooperation with local officialdom, they had access to the semi-official armed forces that enforced the military government's policies of control. They reinvested some of their profits in local patronage – sponsoring funerals, subsidizing schools, helping out in times of sickness – which supplemented the government's sparse provision of social services. They

were increasingly referred to as *itthiphon* (influence), *itthiphon muet* (dark influence), or *jao pho*. This last term originally referred to a local spirit and alluded to supernatural power to act above the law. It was also an exact translation of 'godfather' and was used for the Thai version of the Hollywood film. A police general noted: 'The structure of a godfather's power is like a pyramid. At the top is the man with influence. At the left and right bases of the pyramid are hired gunmen and officials who support the godfather'.¹⁹ Official connections, access to violence, and the lack of law were the basis of rapid primitive accumulation. They were also the basis for success in electoral politics.

At elections, ambitious new provincial businesspeople used village-level networks, cash, official backing, pork-barrel offers to fund local projects, intimidation, and sometimes chicanery (ballot stuffing) to gain votes. Local electorates chose them perhaps for immediate rewards (vote-buying), perhaps because a strong, ambitious representative was more likely to bring benefits back from Bangkok to the locality. At each successive election (1979, 1983, 1986, 1988), more of the MPs were provincial businesspeople. One of the most prominent was Banharn Silpa-archa, a second-generation Chinese, raised in the market of Suphanburi. He made his first fortune by gaining a monopoly on selling chlorine for municipal water supply. He extended into construction contracting, and then into land dealing, transport, petrol stations, and other businesses in the locality. He was first elected MP in 1975 and concentrated on gaining an abnormal share of budget funds for Suphanburi. His businesses rose on the results, and the grateful citizens voted him back at every opportunity.

The provincial MPs were able to distribute budget spending away from the centre and, rather haphazardly, spread it more widely. Their role attached the provinces politically to the centre more tightly than decades of administrative plans. At the same time, parliament gave such new MPs a higher social status, broader access to business opportunities, and higher levels of protection. Laws were passed in 1979 and 1983 to force them into parties, but in reality these parties were little more than factional groupings jockeying for access to the Cabinet and government decision-making. While soldiers and technocrats monopolized the principal ministries, the business parties competed to control the lesser ones, especially those with substantial capital budgets for construction and procurement (education, transport), or those with rule-making powers that framed business opportunities (agriculture, industry). The parliament became a clearing house for business deals, especially construction contracts. Its operation reflected this commercial logic. Candidates invested heavily in elections, and then

sought ways to recoup through corruption or business profits inflated by political advantages. Parties were held together by regular payments from the leader. By the 1990s, elections were preceded by a transfer season of competitive bidding. Money was occasionally distributed to influence specific parliamentary votes. Prem reshuffled the Cabinet on a roughly yearly basis, and called elections on a two-and-a-half-year rhythm, to allow competing factions to share the benefits. The system was dubbed 'money politics'.

BUSINESS AGAINST MILITARY: THE CHATICHAI CABINET, 1988–91

Over the eight years of Premocracy, the relationship between business and military soured. After Prem tamed the 'political soldiers', old-style generals rose back to prominence. With the ending of US patronage, the military relied on the national budget both for legitimate funding and secondary incomes. Its share of the total budget rose from 17 per cent in 1975 to 22 per cent a decade later. With increasing confidence from their base in parliament, business politicians wanted to divert these funds to economic growth. They also resented the generals' sinecures in the management of state enterprises and their domination of electronic media. The press began to raise questions about corrupt commissions on arms deals and other profiteering from the generals' privileged positions in the state apparatus.

From 1984, MPs launched attacks on the size and secrecy of the military budget. In 1985 and 1987, they defeated attempts by the military to extend the constitutional clauses that underpinned the military's political influence. At the 1988 election, the press and political parties launched a campaign for General Prem to retire and allow an elected MP to rise to the premiership. Prem reluctantly concurred, and Chatichai Choonhavan succeeded him.

Chatichai's career symbolized the changing foundations of power over the past generation. He had begun as a cavalry officer leading Bangkok troops in the 1947 coup. After Sarit's rise to power in 1957, he left the military and became a diplomat. He and associates in the Ratchakhru group concentrated on business interests in finance, textiles, and joint ventures with the Japanese. In 1975, they formed the Chat Thai Party. Chatichai established an electoral base in the northeastern regional centre of Khorat, where he allied with a group of local businessmen. By 1988, Chat Thai had become the most successful party at aggregating the factions of provincial businesspeople.

Chatichai's Cabinet set out to transfer power from officials to elected MPs. The key ministries of defence, interior, and finance were given to

elected politicians rather than technocrats or generals. Ministers removed senior officials from key bureaucratic posts and state enterprise boards, substituting more pliant candidates and intimidating officialdom to become more obedient to elected political masters. The parliament cut the military budget, demanded more transparency in its usage, and raised queries over 'irregularities' in arms purchases. The old dictatorial press law was cancelled. The National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB) was relieved of its key role in planning development budgets and in big projects, such as the Eastern Seaboard scheme. Chatichai set up a think tank ('Ban Phitsanulok'), headed by his ex-activist son, Kraisak, and manned by young academics. This group took the initiative for making policy away from ministry technocrats. The Chatichai government represented an end to the military's post-1976 strategy of guided democracy, and a dramatic attempt to shift power away from the bureaucracy and military to the Cabinet and business.

The 'Ban Phitsanulok' policy team proposed that the government change its regional policy by 'turning battlefields into marketplaces', namely ceasing to consider the communist and ex-communist neighbours as enemies, and exploiting the opportunities in their economic liberalization. This policy resumed the attempt, begun by Kukrit in 1975, to obliterate the divisions imposed on the region by the Cold War. It rejected the military concern for security in favour of business's desire for profit. It challenged the military's ability to make foreign policy, and threatened the military's control over border zones and their lucrative trades.

The bureaucracy, and especially the military, reacted angrily against these attacks on their powers and privileges. Through the mid-1980s, a new group of officers belonging to Class Five of the military academy rose to dominate the armed services. They disdained the ideological concerns of the Young Turks or Democratic Soldiers, and represented a return to the traditions of Sarit. They claimed to be directly loyal to the king and were openly sceptical of elected politicians. They also saw no problem with becoming involved in business, and were personally wealthy from construction and other ventures. Over 1989, the Class Five military clique established a dominating position in the military hierarchy and began manoeuvres to undermine the Chatichai Cabinet. The issue of corruption gave them a handle to build wider support for this attempt.

Elected ministers had more power over budgets than ever. With the economy hitting a heady phase of double-digit growth, the budgets were bigger. Many large projects were launched to upgrade the country's increasingly inadequate infrastructure of roads, ports, telecommunications, schools,

and other facilities. In December 1990, Banharn, the MP who had been most successful at diverting an excess share of the national budget to his home constituency, was appointed finance minister. Some MPs began to accuse their more successful peers of malfeasance.

The rise of 'money politics' created a reaction, especially among the new urban middle class. In 1985, Bangkok elected as mayor Chamlong Srimuang, a former Young Turk turned lay ascetic, who promised to clean up corruption. In 1988, he formed the Phalang Tham (moral power) party to take the same crusade into parliament. During 1989–90, press attention switched from scandals over the military budget to stories of kickbacks on infrastructure projects. The transliterated term *khorrachan* entered the language and became a major theme of the daily press. In a deft play on the phrase *kin mueang* ('eating the state', meaning traditional remuneration from the profits of office), Chatichai's government was dubbed the 'buffet Cabinet'.

The press exposure of corruption undermined urban middle-class support for the government and made Chatichai more vulnerable to Class Five's manoeuvres. On 23 February 1991, the generals seized Chatichai at gunpoint and declared a coup.

THE POLITICAL CRISIS OF 1991–92

The coup represented a complex transition. On the one hand, it was a step back into the past. The military was moving to protect its privileged position in the state and its self-appointed role to guide democratic development. The Class Five generals justified the coup to stop the corruption of the elected government and to clear up rumours of plots against members of the royal family several years earlier. They sacked parliament and formed themselves into a National Peacekeeping Council (NPKC), whose Thai name meant 'the council to preserve the peace and the orderliness of the nation'. They later formed a political party named Samakkhitham, or unity. This vocabulary restated the old military ideology of creating unity and orderliness from above. They hand-picked a body to draft a new constitution that restored the military's ability to manipulate parliament through the Senate. The senior bureaucracy quietly supported the coup because it removed the elected politicians who had aggressively encroached on its powers.

On the other hand, the coup expressed the wish of Bangkok business and the urban middle class to find a solution to the 'money politics' of the provincial business politicians. The Class Five generals established a

commission that arraigned Chatichai and his colleagues on corruption charges. They also sacked parliament and picked a former foreign service official turned businessman, Anand Panyarachun, to serve as prime minister. Anand formed a Cabinet of leading technocrats which, free of parliamentary scrutiny, rapidly passed a string of liberal economic reforms. Bangkok business and the middle class were initially enthusiastic.

But ultimately these two agendas were in conflict. As with previous dictatorial cliques, the Class Five generals' wish to oversee the state could not be separated from their wish to use it for personal benefit. These generals presented a contrast to Prem's discreet, almost ascetic style. They were already rich from business and enjoyed flaunting their wealth and power. At a class reunion, one proclaimed: 'Now we control everything except the moon and the stars'. Perhaps Thailand's first internet revelation appeared to show a member of the junta cavorting with a famous former beauty queen. The generals took control of the Defence Ministry and resumed the arms purchases blocked by the Chatichai government. They also gained influence over the Communications Ministry and awarded a huge contract to the CP conglomerate for laying 3 million telephone lines, and confirmed another contract for rising entrepreneur Thaksin Shinawatra to launch a satellite. The junta's own hand-picked premier, Anand, challenged the telephone contract for corrupt over-pricing and conflict of interest (a leading member of the junta was connected to the CP company through marriage). Business support for the junta slipped after foreign governments and financial experts warned foreign tourists and investors to avoid a coup-ruled country. With the added impact of the Gulf War, the growth rate slackened and the stockmarket index lurched downwards.

Against this background of waning urban support, the announcement of the military's new constitution provoked a revival of pro-democracy groups from the 1973–76 era. These came together in the Campaign for Popular Democracy (CPD), which protested against the 'despotic' provisions of the constitution draft to show that 'the army could not claim they had the full support of the country'.²⁰ Yet, in his birthday speech in December 1991, the king advised: 'Anything can be changed... if it does not work smoothly, it can be amended',²¹ and the protests faded. But the respite was temporary. In early 1992, the junta cancelled the corruption proceedings against several of Chatichai's ministers, who shortly afterwards joined the Samakkhitham Party formed to support the military. At elections in March 1992, this party won the largest number of seats and prepared to form a government. After its initial candidate for premier had to

withdraw under suspicion of drug trading, the junta leader General Suchinda Kraprayun stepped into the breach, contravening a public promise never to aspire to the premiership. His Cabinet was a mixture of military figures and prominent money politicians, including Banharn at the helm of the lucrative Communications Ministry. The junta had metamorphosed from the scourge of 'money politics' into its patron.

When the CPD relaunched demonstrations in May, the urban middle class gave open support. The anti-corruption Bangkok mayor, Chamlong, who had been re-elected in 1990 by a landslide, pushed himself into a leading role in the protest. On 17 May 1992, around 200 000 joined a mass demonstration in Bangkok. The press noted the large middle-class showing, dubbed it the 'mobile phone mob', and drew a contrast with the student demonstrations of the 1970s. In fact, the crowd was a cross-section of Bangkok, including many rural migrants, workers, and students. Parallel gatherings met in many provincial centres.

The NPKC junta responded with a strategic plan designed for a communist insurrection, using fully armed soldiers imported from the jungle areas on the borders. Violence continued over three nights (Figure 23). Soldiers shot into the crowd. Buildings and buses were burnt. Chamlong was arrested. Suchinda claimed the demonstration was an attack on nation, religion, and king. He said: 'They want to destroy the system of government, overthrow the constitutional monarchy, and bring in a government that will machine gun people in the streets'.²² State-controlled television showed only property destruction by demonstrators, but CNN and the BBC broadcast footage of military violence that soon circulated locally on videotape. The press defied censorship and published full reports. On the night of 20 May, when events seemed to be moving to a bloody climax, the king summoned Chamlong and Suchinda to the palace and, in a scene broadcast on television, ordered them to stop the violence.

Suchinda's government resigned. The constitution was amended. Anand was brought back for the interim. New elections were held and a new elective Cabinet formed in September 1992.

The damage to the military's status and political role was enormous. The death toll of May 1992 was initially estimated at several hundred, but later reduced to a range of 40–60. For a short time, men in military uniform were abused in the streets and refused treatment in hospitals. Anand dismissed members of the NPKC from the military, and pulled many military figures out of sinecures in state enterprises and public services. He appointed an army head who swore to keep the army out of politics – a litany repeated by his successors.



Figure 23: Black May. A demonstrator being beaten on Ratchadamnoen Avenue on the night of 17 May 1992.

The military's political decline continued through the mid-1990s. When half the Senate came up for renewal in 1995, many military men were replaced by civilians. Generals disappeared from most boardrooms. The military's share of the government budget declined from 22 per cent in 1985 to 13 per cent in 1996, and 6 per cent in 2006. Unofficial income sources were also cut because arms buying, construction, and other military projects came under close public scrutiny. Several lower-ranked personnel freelanced as security guards or by selling protection, particularly in the entertainment industry. Some 700 generals (almost half the total) had no substantive job. Many played a lot of golf, and some exercised their leadership skills by heading national sports associations.

Through the 1990s, the military cast around for a new role that might halt this slide. A 1994 White Paper argued that growing economic competition in the region raised the likelihood of conflict with neighbouring countries, making the army important for 'protecting national economic interests'.²³

Other documents proposed giving the military a larger role in economic development. Some units even opened their facilities to assist tourism. In the late 1990s, the military pressed for a larger role in policing the social conflicts thrown up by economic growth.

None of these claims moved the new elected politicians. The financial crisis of 1997 brought an especially savage fall in the military budget. The Democrat-led government deliberately broke the convention that the defence minister should be a military man, and repealed the anti-communist law that gave the military considerable special powers. This government also installed General Surayud Chulanont as army chief with a mandate to modernize the army, especially by reductions in numbers of recruits and officers.

Yet the military establishment resisted the worst of this assault, mostly through a strategy of inertia. The modernization scheme went nowhere. The number of appointments to the rank of general dropped only slightly. Attempts to remove some of the vast tracts of land acquired in the army's heyday were rebuffed. The military hung onto its control of two television channels and several hundred radio stations, and was able to use these outlets for constant propaganda on the importance of the army to the nation. The armed forces also benefited in the public mind from their close association with the monarchy. Opinion surveys in the early 2000s showed that the army was an admired institution, particularly in contrast to the police and politicians.

Ultimately, globalization furnished the military with the new role it sought. Thailand's borders were crossed by growing flows of illegal migrants trafficked people, drugs, contraband, international terrorists, and arms. In particular, by the early 2000s, the Thai–Burmese border was crossed each year by hundreds of thousands of illegal migrants and millions of methamphetamine pills. Policing these borders became a major part of the army's official role and also an avenue for unofficial earnings. In 2001, the army's biggest operation since the anti-communist campaigns was launched in an attempt to block the massive flow of drugs across the Thai–Burmese border. Around the same time, names of several officers turned up as directors of companies laundering the profits of this drug trade.

The military era seemed finally over. By keeping clear of politics for a decade, and finding a new role at the borders, the army had begun to acquire a new reputation for professionalism, symbolized by figures such as General Surayud. Yet its numbers had scarcely fallen, particularly at the upper levels. Its command of media was unscathed. And its presumption

of a political role, justified by 'national security', had become part of the military's internal culture.

REFORM VERSUS 'MONEY POLITICS'

The military's forced retreat from the political front line opened up new political space that businesspeople and activists hoped to fill. The fear that investors and tourists would flee Thailand in 1992 convinced businesspeople that the globalized economy could no longer be entrusted to generals with outdated agendas. During the 1992 crisis, the three peak business associations of commerce, industry, and banking, which normally kept a distance from public politics, openly called for a return to parliamentary rule. Several prominent Bangkok businesspeople announced their intention of entering politics.

At the same time, intellectuals argued that 1992 was a 'crossroads' (Chai-Anan Samudavanija) or the 'turning point of an era' (Thirayuth Boonmi), with the opportunity to sweep away the legacy of half a century of dictatorial rule. Democracy activists advocated comprehensive constitutional reform to change the balance of power between the state and civil society, liberation of the electronic media from military control, reform of education to emphasize skill and creativity rather than nation-building, and democratic decentralization in place of the Interior Ministry's centralized colonial-style system.

At first, it seemed that parliament would be the channel to achieve this 'turning point'. The press portrayed the elections to reinstall parliamentary democracy in September 1992 as a contest between 'devils' who had supported the junta and 'angels' who represented hopes of reform.

Through the 1990s, the fragmented array of parliamentary parties and factions fell roughly into two groups. On one side, the 'angel' coalition at the September 1992 elections was headed by the Democrat Party. Over the 1991–92 crisis, the party refashioned itself to reflect the aspirations of businesspeople and the urban middle class. It recruited bankers and technocrats who gave the party the credentials for managing the modern globalized economy. It also recruited a new younger generation of politicians who gave the party an image of urban modernity that differentiated it from other provincially based parties. It enjoyed support from Bangkok and from the southern region, which had a high proportion of urban population clustered in old port towns down the peninsula, and which had an export-oriented economy based on rubber, tin, fishing, and tourism. The Democrats projected a liberal image, promised to modernize the economy

through law and institutions, encouraged neighbouring countries (especially Burma) to democratize, and tried to complete the demilitarization of politics. The Democrats were the most successful party of the decade, heading the coalition for all but 28 months between September 1992 and January 2001.

On the other side were the politicians who had supported Chatichai and switched to the military's Samakkhitham in 1992. They came mainly from the central and northeastern regions characterized by an agrarian economy and rather new provincial towns. Their interests were more parochial and commercial, focusing particularly on the distribution of budget to the provinces. They viewed neighbouring countries, as had Chatichai, as economic opportunities to exploit, not political problems to solve. They were not averse to cooperating with the military's efforts to revive its political fortunes.

Parliament failed to deliver on the post-1992 aspirations for change. Partly, this was because the pressure for reform soon faded. Once political instability no longer represented a threat to Thailand's globalized economy, big business lost its passion for taking a personal role in politics; making money out of the continuing boom consumed all of its attention. Similarly, broader middle-class support for reform waned once there seemed to be no political threat to continued urban prosperity. Besides, most MPs (including most in the Democrat Party) were still returned by rural electorates which were little moved by the issues behind the politics of 1991–92.

Thus, the final outcome of the events that began with Chatichai's attack on the bureaucracy in 1988 was a compromise between the senior bureaucracy and the new politicians. Chuan Leekpai, the Democrat leader who became prime minister in late 1992, was a small-town lawyer from the south. He affected the polite, restrained manner of a typical bureaucrat and always worked cautiously, with extreme respect for rules and laws. The aggressive attacks on bureaucratic power of the Chatichai era ceased. No policy-making think tank was formed and the initiative in policy making returned to senior officials. Bureaucratic reform was constantly discussed but never formulated. Similar agreements to share power and profit between bureaucrats and business politicians were negotiated down the ladder from nation to locality. Cabinets returned to the pattern of the 1980s, with reshuffles at roughly annual intervals to allow rival factions to rotate through ministerial posts.

Under this arrangement, the activists' agenda of reforms was quietly sabotaged. Constitutional changes were whittled back to some minor

amendments, proposals for media liberalization were reduced to a single additional television station (ITV), discussion of decentralization was suppressed, and educational reforms were delayed.

The compromise between politicians and officials had two other results. First, it intensified the depletion of natural resources for both private and public benefit. Government agencies commandeered more land and rivers for dams and other infrastructure. The Forestry Department declared many new national parks, denying land rights to hill peoples and peasant 'squatters'. Politicians, officials, and their clients used influence to acquire land for developing industrial estates, pulp plantations, gravel quarries, golf courses, resorts, and residential development. Local peoples who depended on these resources were disadvantaged and provoked to protest. In 1978, the government had counted 48 demonstrations and protests. In 1994, the number was 998, mostly rural, and many over the control of natural resources.

Second, the 1995–97 Cabinets failed to manage the increasingly globalized and delicate national economy. This became apparent when Banharn, 'this new élite's representative *par excellence*',²⁴ became prime minister in 1995 at a time when the economic boom had begun to crumble. Banharn focused on the share-out of the budget among political factions and had little awareness of the need to manage the national economy, which had seemed to boom of its own accord over the previous decade. For his finance minister, he appointed first a pliable young politician and then a pliable technocrat. He dismissed the stockmarket head over a personal quarrel, lost the central bank chief over a bank crash, and then struggled to find willing and qualified replacements. His successor in 1996, Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, promised to field a 'dream team' to manage the economy, but failed to recruit the technocrats he wanted. Within months he had lost his finance minister, central bank chief, and finance permanent secretary, and again was forced to accept mediocre replacements. As signs of the looming economic crisis appeared, academics and businesspeople urged that macro-management 'is so urgent and technical it cannot be left to the politicians', and argued for 'depoliticization'.

The 1992 events had led not to reforms to end the military era, but to a compromise between bureaucrats and business politicians that sabotaged the reform agenda, licensed profiteering at the expense of natural resources and local communities, and neglected management of the national economy.

As parliament stumbled over reforms and as social problems mounted, an intense debate on the future of Thai society blossomed in the public

space *nok rabop* (outside the system) opened up by the retreat of the military. The participants fell roughly into two schools.

On one side were modernists who put their faith in globalization and economic growth. Political scientist Chai-Anan Samudavanija believed that the old elites would soon be 'bypassed'.²⁵ Thirayuth Boonmi, the 1973 student leader turned 'social critic', predicted that Thailand would now experience 'a transfer of power and legitimacy from the state to society . . . from bureaucrats to businessmen, technocrats, and the middle class'.²⁶ To overcome 'money politics', Anek Laothamatas argued that the peasantry had to be modernized out of existence by a mixture of prosperity and education 'so they become individuals like the people of the city and other modern classes . . . only such a civil society can deal with the state and truly control and reform the bureaucracy'.²⁷

On the other side were localists or communitarians who hoped to draw on the ethics of Buddhism and the sharing practices of peasant society to create a more just and harmonious society. A group of senior activists formed the Local Development Institute to mobilize 'social energy' for reform, advocated greater participation at all levels, and drafted plans or reforms in education and healthcare. As a result of this lobby's pressure, the Eighth Plan (1997–2001) was for the first time compiled through a process of consultation and proposed a major shift 'from a growth orientation to people-centred development'.²⁸

During 1994–97, these very varied agendas for reform came together in the demand for a new constitution. In 1994, Amon Chantharasombun, a senior bureaucrat, published the book *Constitutionalism* with proposals for major reform. Amon argued that parliament had become too powerful, had subtracted too much authority from the senior bureaucracy, and was both unstable and inefficient, as indicated by the succession of squabbling coalitions and the poor record on legislation. In 1995, Prawase Wasi played a key role in persuading the prime minister, Banharn, to allow a Constitution Drafting Assembly (CDA) to prepare a new charter independent from the parliament. The CDA was headed by Anand Panyarachun, the former bureaucrat, business leader, and prime minister under the NPKC, who had become a leading advocate of reform. The draft re-engineered parliament along lines suggested by Amon. Election procedures were redrawn to encourage a more stable two-party system. The prime minister's position was strengthened. An Election Commission, National Counter Corruption Commission, Constitutional Court, and ombudsman were introduced to provide checks and balances on corruption and the abuse of power. To increase Bangkok's influence in parliament, 100 additional seats would be

filled by a national vote by party. To prevent the uneducated entering parliament, MPs had to have a tertiary degree – a provision that excluded 99 per cent of the agrarian population.

NGOs lobbied for clauses to change the balance of power between the state on one side and the individual or community on the other. As a result, the draft included an extensive catalogue of the 'rights and liberties of the Thai people', formation of a National Human Rights Commission, removal of the electronic media from the grip of military and government, and democratic decentralization of power to local government.

THE ECONOMIC CRISIS OF 1997

In 1997, the context of these debates on Thailand's future was totally transformed by an economic crisis that changed people's perception of the present.

By the early 1990s, four years of double-digit growth had created problems. The capital's chronic traffic jams symbolized a more general strain on infrastructure. Real wages began to rise as reserves of slack labour were absorbed. Technicians and scientists were in short supply because education planners had not foreseen the inflow of technology-based industries.

In the late 1980s, the World Bank had urged Thailand to liberalize its financial system as the next stage in making the economy more efficient and more accessible to foreign capital. The reform technocrats concurred with this theory. They believed financial liberalization would loosen the grip of the existing conglomerates and allow new entrepreneurs to contribute to growth. Between 1989 and 1993, the baht was made convertible, interest controls removed, the stockmarket made more accessible, and an offshore banking system installed. These reforms coincided with a phase of low growth and high liquidity in the advanced economies that made international investors enthusiastic about 'emerging markets'. Brokerages and offshore banks arrived from Japan and the west. Thailand was hit by a flood of money. In 1990 alone, private capital inflows, net of foreign direct investment, exceeded the total over the previous decade. Between 1988 and 1996, the private sector's foreign debt multiplied tenfold. The stockmarket index rose from around 400 before the liberalization to a peak of 1753 in January 1994.

Thailand already had a high rate of investment and generated enough savings to cover it. Because of the strain on infrastructure and rising wages, profits in export manufacturing were already falling. Thus, although some of the capital inflow was used productively, a lot was diverted to projects

based on very ambitious assumptions of future growth, and a lot went into speculative markets, especially for property. By 1995, the cracks were visible. The stockmarket had begun to slide, the property market had become detached from reality, and export growth was faltering. But foreign investment still surged, as many western firms belatedly tried to participate in what the World Bank had christened the 'East Asian miracle'. The reform technocrats, impressed by their own apparent success and goaded by businesspeople gorging on cheap credit, refused to rein in the boom. They imposed only ineffectual controls on financial markets and denied any need to float the currency.

In late 1996, foreign capital began to leak away, and international speculators began to attack the baht. The central bank contributed 500 billion baht to prop up financial institutions and committed virtually the entire foreign reserves to protect the currency. But against the enormous funds of international speculators, these funds were puny. The government was obliged to seek the help of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which raised a loan of US\$17.2 billion, mostly from Asian neighbours. In return, it insisted that Thailand allow the currency to float on 2 July 1997, imposed an austerity programme of increased taxes and high interest rates, demanded the closure of weak financial institutions, and began reforms to further liberalize the Thai economy and facilitate access for foreign capital.

This package did nothing to soothe foreign investors. Most of the loan and portfolio money that had come to Thailand since financial liberalization fled the country within the next two years. The baht plummeted to less than half its value (against the dollar), before recovering to around two-thirds. Firms that had taken foreign loans were rendered illiquid as well as technically bankrupt. Banks that had intermediated the loans were wrecked. Creditors stopped paying their bankers. Consumers stopped spending. Over 2 million people lost their jobs. In 1998, the economy shrank 11 per cent – a dramatic end to the 40-year 'development' era during which the Thai economy had averaged 7 per cent growth and never fallen below 4 per cent.

In mid-1998, the IMF was forced to abandon its austerity programmes in the face of social distress, business anger, and international condemnation. The government tentatively began a Keynesian economic stimulus (budget deficit, low interest rates), which was intensified by a new government installed in early 2001. In 2002, the economy began to revive.

But it was an economy that had changed out of all recognition as a result of boom and bust. Since the Second World War, the Thai conglomerates, especially those based around the major banks, had been at the core of

economic growth. In the crisis, a few of the conglomerates disappeared altogether, and most others were reduced in size and importance. The big banks survived, but reoriented themselves to consumer banking and were no longer the centres of the key commercial networks.

Foreign capital acquired a much larger role in the economy. In the eye of the crisis, restrictions on foreign holdings in banks, property, and other sectors were eased. Investment flowed in to buy bankrupt companies, especially in manufacturing, and to exploit new opportunities during the recovery while local capital was still shy. Helped by the fall in the currency's value, exports more than ever drove the economy, with exports of manufactures made by multinational companies as the spearhead. International car manufacturers bought out their bankrupt local partners and reoriented their business to export, resulting in Thailand becoming the world's 11th-largest car exporter by the mid 2000s. European chains built 150 megastores in a decade and captured over half of everyday retailing.

Most surviving Thai capital was clustered in service businesses where laws still provided some protection against foreign investment. Many business leaders of the post-crisis era were relatively new faces with a business base in services – for example, Thaksin Shinawatra in mobile phones, the Maleenont family in entertainment, and the King Power duty-free retailing company. The biggest success of the bust was Charoen Siriwattanapakdi. His wealth was based on a cheap liquor business under a government concession. He was not undermined by foreign debt because much of his business was still in cash and foreign bankers were reluctant to lend to him. His cashflow held up because consumers downtraded to his cheap products. He bought massive amounts of land that his bankrupt colleagues were desperate to sell, and emerged as the country's biggest plantation owner and property developer.

In the aftermath of the crisis, the Thai economy was much further integrated into the international economy through heightened flows of exports and investment capital. Multinational manufacturers dominated the export economy, with the surviving Thai capitalists clustered in property and services.

REACTIONS TO CRISIS

The shock of the crisis created a widespread demand for change, especially in the political system that had led the country into this disaster.

The constitution drafted over 1995–96 initially faced fierce opposition. Many politicians and bureaucrats saw it as an attack on their power. Police

chiefs, army generals, senators, judges, and village heads all came out in opposition. Some provincial boss politicians began to mobilize the Village Scouts to block it. But the draft's fate became bound up with the economy's slide into crisis in 1997. Bangkok's businesspeople and middle class began to blame the crisis on mismanagement by politicians, and seized on the constitution as the way to bring politics into line with the needs of the globalized economy. White-collar street demonstrations demanded passage of the constitution. The draft was passed on 27 September 1997, the same day that the government concluded an agreement with the IMF.

After the baht was floated in July 1997 and the economy slid rapidly into crisis, business and the urban middle class demanded the removal of the current Chavalit Cabinet, dominated by provincial bosses. They wanted the Democrats and their technocrat team to return and manage the economy. Some appealed to the army to intervene, but the generals held aloof. In November 1997, Chavalit resigned and a reshuffle of minor parties enabled the Democrats to return without an election.

The Democrats lobbied the IMF to adjust the details of the package, but not before the economic slump had created widespread bankruptcy and social distress. In general, the Democrats cooperated with the IMF and suffered a gradual erosion of support as the crisis deepened and lingered over the next three years.

The enthusiasm for globalization declined with the GDP figures. Some now pictured globalization as a malign force that had 'enslaved' Thailand and undermined its stability. Others concluded that the crisis showed Thailand was not prepared for globalization and had been unwary of the dangers. Even devout liberal modernists, who initially protested that Thailand should not reject globalization and turn inwards, now admitted that the country needed to strengthen its internal institutions in order to survive and prosper in an unstable and rapidly changing world. In the pit of the crisis, localists dominated the debate. They blamed the crisis on the prior pattern of development. The monk-intellectual P. A. Payutto said the crisis had arisen because Thailand 'misguidedly developed the country in a way which relied too much on the outside'.²⁹ The king again legitimized this thinking in his birthday speech in December 1997:

Being a tiger is not important. What is important is to have enough to eat and to live; and to have an economy which provides enough to eat and live. . . . We have to live carefully and we have to go back to do things which are not complicated and which do not use elaborate, expensive equipment. We need to move backwards in order to move forwards. If we don't do like this, the solution to this crisis will be difficult.³⁰

In the short term, this was simply practical advice as people laid off from the urban economy were thrown back on the resources of the family and village. Many government departments launched community-based schemes to combat the crisis. NGO activists persuaded the World Bank not to disperse its main social relief loan through government channels, but instead through an NGO-established network to local communities for projects to build such 'social capital' as local welfare schemes, education projects, child-care centres, and environmental protection schemes.

Prawase called for 'a war of national salvation' to rebuild society from the local community upwards, based on a 'cultural economics which is not about money alone, but also about family, community, culture, and the environment'.³¹ He and others called for the government to focus more on agriculture, which had been neglected in the rush to industrialization yet still served as the primary support for half the population. Rural protest groups made similar demands with a more immediate and practical bent. They demanded the government bail out the debts of poor farmers rather than those of urban businesspeople and bankers. They petitioned government to support falling crop prices. Some thrown out of urban jobs occupied vacant land, and activists demanded land reform to reverse the trend of transfer of land from farmers to urban use and speculation.

Another theme of protest developed among businesspeople driven to bankruptcy. The IMF and much mainstream economic analysis blamed the crisis on the cronyism and inefficiency of 'Asian' capitalism, justifying its destruction and replacement by more advanced international capital. But local businesspeople rejected this interpretation and felt abandoned by state, Democrats, and technocracy. In early 1998, they formed new organizations, such as the Alliance for National Salvation; held street demonstrations; took delegations to Washington; and railed against the 'neocolonial' policies of the IMF.

These efforts initially excited very little public support. But over 1998–99, the social impact of the crisis broadened, social divisions widened, and protests spread. Even leaders such as Anand Panyarachun, who initially counselled Thais not to reject globalization, welcomed a more self-reliant approach to managing the crisis 'for the sake of the Thai way-of-life'.³² Various projects were launched to overcome the crisis by self-strengthening. A revered senior monk, Luangta Mahabua, collected donations of 2 billion baht, including 1.7 tonnes of gold, to offset the national debt. Themes of national defence surfaced in popular culture. In 1999, the film *Bang Rajan* became a huge hit by telling the schoolbook history of villagers defying the Burmese attack in 1767. Princess Suphankalaya, a semi-legendary sister

of King Naresuan who won Siam's 'independence' from the Burmese in the 16th century, became a popular goddess who could save businesses from the crisis. A 'new nationalist' group of academics and businesspeople hoped to 'plant the love of country in every person in every corner of the country' so that 'the power to rescue economic sovereignty will grow of its own accord'.³³

In 2000, the economic crisis began to ease. But the shock of the event had thrown up powerful themes about national defence, self-strengthening, the neglect of rural society, the need for a new approach to development policy, and reassessment of Thailand's position in the context of globalization.

THAIS LOVING THAIS

Ultimately, this period of crisis and debate ended with resurrection of the tradition of the strong dictatorial state – this time promoted by big businesspeople wanting the power of the state to manage the threats of both globalization and democratization.

In July 1998, Thaksin Shinawatra founded a new political party. Thaksin had been one of the most successful entrepreneurs of the boom, building a net worth of almost US\$2 billion within five years from a batch of oligopolistic telecommunication concessions, and from deft exploitation of the rising stockmarket. He flirted with politics in the mid-1990s, projecting the image of a modern, technology-aware businessman. His new party in 1998 attracted the support of other business groups that had been battered by the crisis but had survived. These included the biggest conglomerate, CP; the leading bank, Bangkok Bank; and several firms engaged in service industries oriented to the domestic market – the major segment of the economy still protected in various ways from foreign ownership. This big-business enthusiasm for politics reiterated the pattern following national crises in 1932, 1946, 1973, and 1992. On those earlier occasions, the enthusiasm had proved short-lived, but business now was much stronger, and the crisis had convinced many business leaders of the need to control the state to manage globalization. Thaksin presented himself as a successful businessman who would help both small and large firms to recover from the crisis.

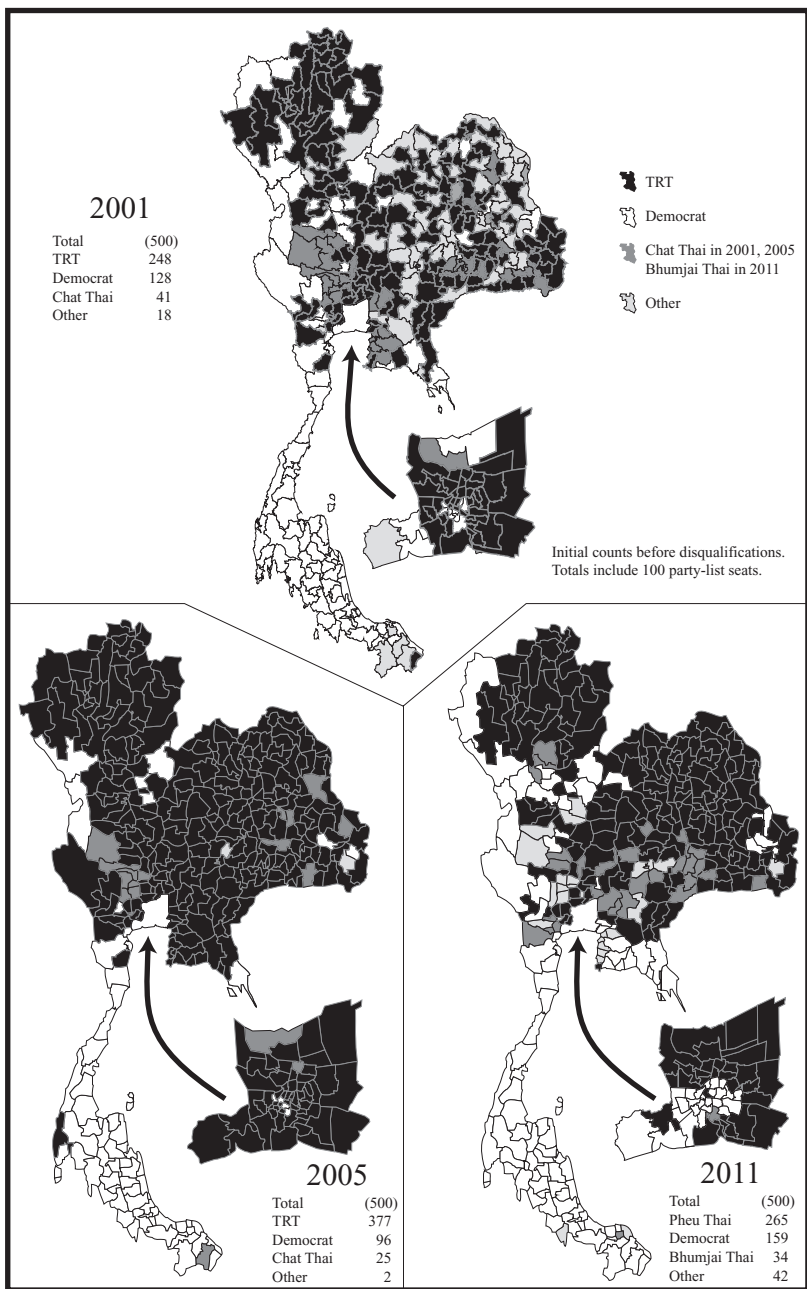
The new party played to the post-crisis mood. Its name, Thai Rak Thai (TRT), 'Thais love Thais', reflected the nationalistic reaction to the crisis. Its slogan, 'Think new, act new, for every Thai', and its manifesto promising to 'bring about reform in the fundamental structure of the country in all respects, so that Thailand is strong, modern, and ready to

face the challenges of the world in the new era', embraced the theme of self-strengthening to manage globalization. The party contacted NGOs and rural activists to help compile an election programme of agrarian debt relief, village capital funds, and cheap health care that recognized the impact of the crisis on the countryside. The party's programme adopted the localist vocabulary of community empowerment and bottom-up grass-roots development. Prawase Wasi, Luangta Mahabua (the monk who had organized nationalist self-help schemes), and several rural protest groups endorsed the party.

With evidence of this growing support, Thaksin gathered the support of many provincial bosses who understood that the Democrats and their allies were likely to be defeated because of their association with IMF-mandated policies. Thaksin also spent an unusually large budget on a more polished, coordinated, and powerful election campaign than hitherto seen. At the polls in January 2001, Thai Rak Thai won two short of an absolute majority, and subsequently converted that into a majority of almost 300 out of 500 seats by absorbing two other parties (including that of Chavalit). The Democrat Party hung onto its base in the south and remained the only other major party (Map 7).

Besides this strength in parliament, Thaksin benefited from new constitutional provisions designed to strengthen the prime minister and create more stable and long-lasting governments. He also conducted himself as a politician of the communications age, delivering weekly radio chats about his activity, and dominating press and television news. The government implemented its electoral programme within its first year in office, cementing public support.

Thaksin promised not just to extricate the economy from the crisis, but to leapfrog Thailand to first-world economic status. Principally this would be done by transforming the torpid bureaucracy into a support system for private enterprise. Thaksin stated that 'A country is a company. The management is the same'. He copied Chatichai's example of making wholesale reappointments in the senior bureaucracy and state enterprises to intimidate officialdom into submissiveness; set up an extensive structure of advisory bodies to take control of policy making away from the ministries; and overhauled the bureaucratic structure. Thaksin called himself a CEO prime minister, and bestowed the same prefix on provincial governors and diplomats who were summoned for retraining in their new role as promoters of economic growth. A programme for privatizing state enterprises was launched. Government financial institutions were ordered to provide credit to priority sectors and chosen firms. Foreign consultants were hired to



Map 7: Electoral geography, 2001–11.

propose programmes to increase competitiveness. Individual firms associated with the government benefited from debt relief and promotional policies. The growth rate improved from 2002 and the stockmarket index turned sharply upwards in 2003. Thaksin promised he would lead Thailand into the OECD, the club of rich countries, by his second term.

This aggressive capitalism was linked with a new populism. The policies promised in the 2001 election campaign proved popular at the polls and even more so after they were implemented. In part, these policies provided improved welfare, especially a universal health care scheme. In part, these were schemes to extend capitalism down to the roots of the economy, transforming semi-subsistence peasants by better access to capital and markets. But Thaksin's populism was not only a matter of policies. He cultivated a public presence and mass popularity in a manner totally new for Thailand's political culture. He talked to the nation weekly on radio. He transported Cabinet meetings into the provinces. He toured villages with ministers and officials in tow, bringing instant government to the locality. He promised to eradicate poverty and conducted a pilot scheme in the poor northeast as a live television reality show. By 2005, the party's slogan was changed to the intensely populist 'The heart of TRT is the people', and TRT fought that year's general election on a platform promising government assistance from cradle to grave.

In early 2003, Thaksin launched a 'war on drugs'. Cheap methamphetamine pills from Burma had captured a market during the economic crisis. Pyramid-selling methods had extended their reach into schools. Thaksin gave police and local authorities three months to clear their areas. Over that period, more than 2500 died, mostly shot by handguns. Government claimed drug dealers were shooting one another to prevent grassing. Others feared police had been incentivized to kill people, guilty or innocent, to meet performance targets. When a UN official expressed concern, Thaksin snapped back, 'The UN is not my father'. But opinion polls showed overwhelming support for the campaign.

Thaksin was rewarded with unprecedented popularity for a Thai-elected politician. On his tours he excited scenes normally reserved for rock stars. But while his support among the mass broadened, his support among influential parts of the urban elite narrowed.

Some of the disquiet arose from his business roots and his project to use state power to promote business. Before the 2001 election, he was accused of concealing assets that he had to disclose when a minister in the 1990s. He was acquitted, but in a judgement that was strange and possibly corrupt. Many benefits of his pro-business policies seemed to accrue to



Figure 24: Waving the flag. Thaksin Shinawatra declares victory in a war against drugs in December 2003.

a small coterie of business allies. Several government decisions seemed to benefit his family business. His own family wealth tripled over his four-year term, largely through the spectacular recovery of the stockmarket, but also because of several government moves that flagrantly assisted his family companies.

To stem rising criticism, Thaksin's government reasserted tight control over the electronic media. Newspapers were cajoled with favours and threatened by the manipulation of advertising budgets. Thaksin's family bought a controlling stake in the single independent station (ITV) formed since 1992. Other channels were ordered to broadcast only 'positive' news. Public intellectuals who raised their voices were fiercely attacked. NGOs were denigrated as protesting only in order to attract foreign funding. Local groups that continued attempts to defend their local interests were described as 'anarchists' and enemies of the nation. The Thaksin government also neutralized the new bodies set up by the constitution to act as checks and balances on the enhanced power of the executive. Thaksin said he wanted *kanmueang ning*, quiet or calm politics, and expressed open admiration for the political systems of Singapore and Malaysia. On the stump, he presented himself as the friend of the people, and claimed he had to struggle against attempts by the old elite to preserve their own privileges and obstruct his efforts on behalf of the mass. He argued that checks and balances, human rights, open debate, and even parliamentary opposition got in the way of his mission.

In February 2005, TRT won a general election by a landslide, taking 67 per cent of the vote and 377 of the 500 seats, dominating the north, northeast, centre, and Bangkok. The opposition Democrats were reduced to their heartland in the south ([Map 7](#)).

Electoral success and personal popularity brought its own problems in a country where monarchy had acquired a massive public presence at the climax of such a long reign, and where the military still harboured memories of its political role. Thaksin had set out to elevate business and elected representatives above an old elite of status and bureaucratic appointment. Earlier politicians had been careful not to intrude on the public space of the king. Extreme royalists viewed Thaksin's popularity as a challenge. In his birthday speech in December 2001, with the Cabinet members in his audience, the king said 'at present everybody knows the country seems to be facing catastrophe', and attributed this to a 'double standard' that was a new phenomenon in Thailand.³⁴ Shortly after, General Prem, head of the Privy Council, gave a speech advising people not to admire rich people unworthy of respect. Over 2003–04, some privy councillors repeatedly gave

speeches attacking corruption and excessive wealth, often citing the words of the king.

Thaksin was aware that the army could pose the greatest threat to his project to overhaul government. After all, a coup had ended Chatichai's similar project in 1988–91. As a police cadet, Thaksin had spent a year in the Armed Forces Preparatory School and hence had old classmates who had graduated in Class Ten of the Military Academy. In the annual military promotions during his first term, some of these classmates were accelerated up the ladder. But as they, like Thaksin, were aged around 50, they were still remote from the crucial top rungs. To plug this gap, Thaksin also leapfrogged his own cousin, Chaisit, up the hierarchy to become army commander in August 2003, and made another cousin the permanent secretary of the Defence Ministry. However, Chaisit proved so incompetent that he had to be replaced in 2004. This blatant favouritism in military promotions angered those who were by-passed, and also angered prominent old soldiers like General Prem and General Surayud, who expected to have influence over such matters.

The first move against Thaksin concerned the far south. In 2002, Thaksin had dismantled the old military command in the three border provinces and put the police in control. Police operations in this zone, including killings during the 2003 drug war, seem to have been the trigger for a new phase of violence. After the Narathiwat armoury raid in January 2004 (see [chapter 8](#)), these provinces became the scene of near-daily incidents of killing and bombing. Thaksin initially labelled the perpetrators as 'forest bandits', and relied on the police to eliminate them through clandestine arrest and killing. This strategy widened the conflict. Immediately after the 2005 election, two privy councillors publicly demanded a change of policy, citing the king's advice to pursue a strategy of 'accessibility, understanding, and development.' Reluctantly, Thaksin established a National Reconciliation Commission.

The Bangkok middle class had initially welcomed Thaksin's promises to grow the economy and jolt Thailand forwards. Only a liberal fringe had objected to his disdain for rights, freedoms, and democratic methods, and the conflict of interest with his family business interests. In 2005, however, his increasingly aggressive populism began to raise apprehension. Some feared the middle classes were losing political influence, and would find themselves paying for both Thaksin's populist handouts and his coterie's inflated business profits. After a Thaksin-allied businessman tried to buy (and probably silence) Matichon, the leading upmarket press group, the media rebelled against the government's constraints and intimidation. Press

criticism increased. One press owner, Sondhi Limthongkun, who provocatively criticized Thaksin on television, was thrown off the airwaves, and transformed his programme into a series of street-based demonstrations. Sondhi also increased the emotional level by claiming that Thaksin was a threat to the monarchy.

Sondhi's demonstrations fizzled out in late 2005. But in January 2006, Thaksin's family sold their holding company, Shin Corp, to the Singapore Government's Temasek Holdings for 73 billion baht without incurring one baht of tax liability. The government had altered several laws, and even reversed precedent-setting tax judgements, to make this possible. The sale provoked an outpouring of disgust. Sondhi joined with a clutch of old activists, including Chamlong Srimuang, to reactivate his demonstrations under the banner of the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD). Elements in the army began to contemplate the possibility of removing Thaksin by coup and seem to have coordinated with the PAD. The demonstrations concentrated on painting Thaksin and the TRT as a threat to the monarchy, claiming to unearth a republican plot hatched during a TRT trip to Finland, and accusing Thaksin of *lèse majesté*. The demonstrators adopted the king's colour, yellow, as a kind of uniform. They called on the king to remove Thaksin but the king dismissed this idea as 'irrational'.

Thaksin responded by calling a general election in April 2006. The Democrats and other opposition parties resolved to boycott the polls. TRT swept to another victory but was accused of malpractice. The king summoned Thaksin to audience, after which Thaksin announced he would step back from the political front line. The king also called on the judiciary to take a more active role in order 'to move democracy forward'. The courts annulled the election and another was scheduled for October. Thaksin re-emerged from his temporary eclipse and claimed 'charismatic people and some organisations outside those sanctioned by the Constitution are trying to overthrow the government, rules and laws, Constitution and democracy'.³⁵ Speaking to troops, General Prem emphasized that the army 'belonged' to the king and that the prime minister was like a jockey.

Thaksin's ambitions in business and politics had brought strange bedfellows into alliance against him. Conservative forces in the palace, military, and bureaucracy, that were already uneasy about the pace of Thailand's change under globalization, were galvanized into action by Thaksin's sweeping schemes. Liberal reformers in the intelligentsia and middle class, who had long been critical of business domination in politics, were alarmed by the combination of business wealth, populist appeal, and personalized

authoritarian rule. The reaction against Thaksin became a reaction against electoral democracy.

THE 2006 COUP

On the night of 19 September 2006, while Thaksin was in New York to address the UN, the army took power by coup. Although coups seem common in Thailand, this was the first time in almost 50 years that a coup carried out by driving tanks into the capital had been a success. Although the operation went smoothly, there had been struggles in advance. The coup leader, General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, had become army chief in 2005 after the king had refused to confirm Thaksin's candidate for the post. In the three months before the coup, Sonthi transferred over a hundred unit commanders in order to reduce the influence of Thaksin's allies. The tanks were used to block the gates of Bangkok army units that might have been sympathetic to Thaksin. They were not there as decoration.

The coup had a distinct royalist tinge. The coup leaders were professed royalists. Yellow ribbons were tied round the tank barrels and pinned on the soldiers. The group initially called itself the Council for Democratic Reform under Constitutional Monarchy but dropped the latter part when it appeared this title implicated the king in the coup. General Sonthi's choice as prime minister was General Surayud, his former commanding officer and now a privy councillor. The coup group tore up the 1997 constitution, and promised to write a replacement and restore elections within a little over a year.

The coup group claimed that Thaksin's government had committed *lèse majesté*, interfered with constitutional bodies, and caused social division. But there was also an element of military opportunism. Generals returned to the front pages, to the boards of state enterprises, and to other positions of influence. Over two budget cycles, the allocation to the military was raised by almost one half. Ambitious projects for buying arms resurfaced. The army was placed back in control of combating the militancy in the far south, reversing Thaksin's order of 2002.

The main aim of the coup regime was to adjust the balance of political power by neutralizing Thaksin, reducing the role of elected politicians, and returning power to the bureaucracy and the army. The model for this project was the post-1976 era when many of the coup leaders had been involved in controlling the communist insurgency. In their internal documents, General Sonthi's group imagined that the small number of former 1970s activists in TRT was now spearheading the old communist

agenda through electoral politics. The generals talked of waging a 'war for the people' and 'war for the king'. On the model of the old vigilante organizations, special army teams were sent into the villages in the north and northeast to 'persuade' people to drop their support for Thaksin and TRT.

The courts dissolved the TRT Party for electoral malpractice at the 2006 polls, banned 111 of the party executives from political activity for five years, and froze around 90 billion baht in assets belonging to Thaksin's extended family. Several court cases were launched against the family for corruption. A hand-picked assembly drafted a new constitution that qualified the power of the executive, reduced the role of parliament, attempted to protect the bureaucracy against political interference, and gave seven senior judges immense power to appoint the members of agencies acting as checks and balances on the executive. The assembly passed an Internal Security Act, reviving ISOC, which had directed the anti-communist campaign in the Cold War era, and a Computer Crime Act that imposed harsh penalties. With these tools, the army intended to regain a supervisory role in national politics, rather on the model of managed democracy from the Prem era in the 1980s. Politicians were lured to defect to new parties that would cooperate with this project.

But the coup and the army's subsequent actions failed to suppress the forces supporting Thaksin. General Surayud's Cabinet, peopled mostly by retired bureaucrats, was soon perceived as incapable of governing the complex and demanding society that Thailand had now become. The initial enthusiasm for the coup quickly dwindled away. Those who had benefited from Thaksin's populism and who felt they had gained a space in Thailand's politics would not easily be pushed back to the margins. In villages, now much more sophisticated than in the 1970s, the army's revival of 'psych ops' to eradicate support for Thaksin was fiercely resented. Although in exile, Thaksin maintained a public presence through the internet, and through the splashy purchase of a UK football club, Manchester City. Despite the party dissolution, several TRT politicians refused to be cowed and kept up constant public criticism of the coup regime. After announcement of elections to restore the elected parliament in December 2007, the TRT was reborn in the shell of the tiny People Power Party (PPP). Thaksin persuaded a veteran politician, Samak Sundaravej, to become its leader. Its electoral platform promised to bring back TRT's policies, and its unofficial slogan was 'Vote Samak, get Thaksin'.

When the new constitution was submitted to the first-ever national referendum in August 2007, the 58:42 margin of acceptance was far less than

the coup government predicted, especially after investing public money heavily to win support and disrupt the opposition campaign. The generals used threats and funds to corral experienced politicians into new parties that could oppose the PPP at the polls, but most refused. At the election in December 2007, the PPP secured just less than an absolute majority, sweeping the upper north, the northeast, and the outskirts of the capital where many migrants from these regions lived. The Democrats won the south and central Bangkok. This stark electoral geography portrayed the division in the country over Thaksin. Samak formed a coalition government. Three weeks later, Thaksin returned from exile, showily touching his forehead to the motherland for the benefit of the crowds at the airport. The new government announced plans to revise the coup group's constitution and block the judicial assault on Thaksin, his family, and associates.

The coup had failed to undermine Thaksin's domination of the parliament and hence the executive. The forces arrayed against him now turned elsewhere, to the courts and the street.

The judiciary had played little part in Thai politics until the king urged the judges to unravel the tangle left by the 2006 election. Now the political role of the courts suddenly expanded. Within a few months, the speaker of the house was removed for poll fraud, the foreign minister for infringing the constitution, and the health minister for an incorrect statement of assets. Thaksin's wife was convicted for tax evasion, and then Thaksin himself was sentenced to two years in jail for abuse of power in a sale of state-owned land to his wife. He fled overseas in advance of the verdict. In September 2008, Samak was removed as prime minister for receiving a small payment as host of a radio cookery show.

In parallel, Sondhi Limthongkun and the PAD revived street demonstrations. In May 2008, they established a permanent protest camp close to Government House. Several senior soldiers and prominent aristocrats attended. Donations from sympathetic businesspeople financed sophisticated staging with programmes by prominent entertainers, uplinked to satellite for a wider television audience. The crowds, swathed in yellow and emblazoned with slogans showing support for the king, were dubbed the 'Yellow Shirts'. Sondhi Limthongkun called for the removal of the pro-Thaksin government, but also proposed a 'new politics', meaning that Thailand should abandon the principle of one person/one vote on grounds that elections were won with money (by vote-buying or populist policies) and hence the results held no legitimacy. Kasit Piromya, a former top diplomat turned PAD supporter, yearned for 'politics that has something to do with the word morality'.

After Samak was replaced as prime minister by Somchai Wongsawat, Thaksin's brother-in-law, in January 2008 the Yellow Shirt demonstrators occupied Government House. Violent incidents increased, including a pitched battle when the police tried to break a PAD blockade of parliament. The army repeatedly refused the government's requests to declare an emergency. The PAD sent squads to disrupt government offices and temporarily occupy airports. In December, a large PAD group occupied Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi International Airport, causing it to be closed down for a week, stranding 350 000 tourists and causing massive economic damage. The army refused to prevent the occupation or to end it. The courts delivered another judgement, again dissolving the Thaksinite party (for electoral fraud by one executive member) and thereby causing the government to fall. The PAD demonstrators quit the airport. The army and some business leaders helped to establish a new coalition government, headed by the Democrat Party. Abhisit Vejjajiva became prime minister. His government gave a billion baht to ISOC to carry out another campaign to eradicate Thaksin's influence, targeting the northeast.

The 2006 coup and its aftermath had done massive damage to the democratic institutions and traditions that had been shakily established over the prior three decades. A coup was again thinkable. The army was repoliticized. Parliamentary politics were hamstrung by the coup group's constitution. A protest movement, based in the old elite and urban middle class, had disrupted government while enjoying apparent immunity from control by the courts or security forces. The judiciary had plunged into politics, heralded by some as advancing the rule of law, but lambasted by others for political bias. The claims of the army and PAD to be acting in defence of the monarchy had brought the symbolic capital of the royal institution into the centre of everyday politics. The PAD had proposed that Thailand should abandon the basic principle of electoral politics. Thailand's democracy and monarchy had both been pitched into crisis.

RED SHIRTS

The coup and the subsequent attempts to eliminate Thaksin's influence by military operations, judicial decisions, and street politics helped to provoke the first mass movement in Thai political history.

After the September 2006 coup, small groups of activists held protest rallies. In early 2007, remnants of TRT joined with these groups. From May, Thaksin began to appear at these rallies from overseas, first by telephone, later by CD recordings, and finally by live video link. In the areas loyal to

Thaksin in the upper north and northeast, protest groups formed, often loosely associated with community radio stations or individual radio DJs. On 7 July 2007, the United Front of Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) was formed as an umbrella for protest against the coup. It staged a rally at the house of General Prem Tinsulanond, head of the Privy Council, accusing him of masterminding the coup. The UDD rallies in Bangkok gradually swelled as disillusion with the coup spread and fear of the army dwindled.

After the December 2007 election returned the pro-Thaksin party to power, UDD ceased activity but revived in May 2008 to counter the growing intensity and violence of the PAD rallies. In July, the Samak government launched a television programme *Khwaam jing wan ni* (Truth Today) to counter Sondhi Limthongkun's broadcasts from the PAD stage. The three presenters adopted red shirts as their uniform. Since the coup, some but not all protesters had worn red. From around this time, it became a badge. Aside from other associations, red is the colour representing the people in the Thai tricolour national flag and had been used in the visual identity of the Thaksinite parties, TRT and PPP. Perhaps more than anything else, it was simply the strongest visual contrast to yellow.

Through late 2008, Red Shirts held massive stadium rallies. They were attended by supporters bussed in from the north and northeast; by migrant workers from the same regions, especially the drivers of Bangkok's taxis and motorcycle taxis; and increasingly by academics, activists, and urban professionals who felt that the whole sequence of events since the 2006 coup, and especially PAD's 'new politics', was an attack on democratic values and practice. Many who had opposed Thaksin as a threat to democracy now opposed the PAD as an even worse threat.

Around the rallies of both colours, petty violence increased. On one side were groups wearing yellow shirts and claiming to defend the monarchy. On the other were groups wearing red shirts and claiming to defend democracy.

After the Somchai government was disqualified and the Democrat-led coalition installed in December 2008, the UDD launched a satellite television station, and in March 2009 established a permanent protest camp outside Government House, demanding the government resign and hold an immediate election. Thaksin appeared almost daily on video link from exile in Dubai, openly accusing the generals, especially Prem and Surayud, of masterminding his overthrow. Thaksin identified himself with Thailand's democracy movement from the 1932 revolution through the incidents of 1973 and 1992, but did not deny that he was motivated also by a looming court decision on seizure of his assets frozen after the coup.

His rhetoric grew steadily more intense: 'If there is the sound of gunfire, of soldiers shooting the people, I'll return immediately to lead you to march on Bangkok. I can no longer accept such dictatorship.'³⁶

At the onset of the long Thai New Year holiday in mid-April 2009, taxi drivers started to blockade Bangkok's traffic. A Red Shirt group travelled to Pattaya and disrupted a summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), then returned to extend the blockade in the capital. On 13 April, the army brought 10 000 troops into the city to sweep the demonstration off the streets. Thirteen leaders surrendered and were detained. The camp was dismantled. The Red Shirts' satellite television station and several radio stations were closed down, and thousands of websites blocked. Officially only two people died in the operation, but the scale of the military operation, as well as the protesters' burning of 52 buses in their defence, signalled a significant increase in the level of violence.

The Red Shirt movement continued to grow, largely by local activism. In Chiang Mai, the number of Red Shirt groups increased from five to 24 between 2008 and 2010. The UDD conducted political schools, events held over two to three days, mostly around the north and northeast. A few places proclaimed themselves as 'red villages'. Two skilled orators, Nattawut Saikua and Jatuporn Promphan, became popular in local meetings and on the revived satellite television channel. In early 2010, the movement began preparing for another Bangkok protest by holding rallies and fund-raising events around the north and northeast.

On 14 March 2010, thousands of Red Shirts poured into Bangkok, mostly in pickup trucks, dressed in red and blaring music, creating a carnival atmosphere. Initially they received a warm welcome, not only from migrants in the capital but also from many Bangkok salarymen and salarywomen. Officially the movement's demand was again for a new election, but for many participants the aim was slightly different: 'We all adored Thaksin and wanted him back as our prime minister. The government and the military drove him out of power.'³⁷

An attempt at negotiation with the government collapsed within two days, possibly because Thaksin intervened. While most participants were committed to non-violence, a minority faction believed that only violence would bring any result. On 10 April, when the army tried to clear part of the demonstration, a scuffle erupted into a fire fight. A group of unidentified 'men in black', probably renegade soldiers and former rangers, attacked the soldiers, killing a prominent colonel. Over 20 protesters died, mostly from high-velocity rounds. Soon after, the protest site moved to Rajprasong at the heart of the city's commercial district. Among some office workers and local businesspeople, sympathy declined as the disruption of city life lengthened



Figure 25: Red Shirt procession through Bangkok, March 2010.

and incidents of violence increased. On 19 May, the army cleared the demonstration by force. The retail complex behind the protest site was torched along with a handful of other city buildings. Four government offices in the provinces also burned. Over the eight weeks of the protest, more than 90 people had died, including about 80 protesters and around 10 from the security forces.

The Red Shirt movement was the political expression of the mass society that had developed over the past decades. The participants were mainly from the lower rungs of society, but often those with rising incomes, swelling aspirations, broader horizons from labour migration and new communications, and growing resentment of inequities in income, opportunity, and respect. They came especially from the upper north and north-east, culturally distinct areas that had been incorporated into Siam only in the 19th century. They expressed anger at 'double standards', meaning the unequal treatment of yellow and red by the courts and army, but more generally the inequities throughout society. They dubbed themselves as *phrai* and their opponents as *ammāt*, feudal terms for serf and lord, to mock the paternalism of bureaucrats and bureaucrat-minded politicians. They were not so much seeking to overthrow the political order but to change it so they could participate more fully and benefit more fairly. As a result of decentralization of local government from the late 1990s and Thaksin's tilt to populism, they had learnt to value elections as a means to gain a larger share. As one participant said, 'Bangkok people already have a good life, they don't need elections for change, but we do.'³⁸

Thailand's old institutions and large parts of the middle class opposed both Thaksin and the politics he came to represent. Thaksin had attacked the culture and prominence of the bureaucracy and tried to gain greater control over the army. The middle class felt threatened by Thaksin's popularity and low ethical standards. Many had initially supported him and later turned against him with all the venom of a disappointed lover. The conservative response was also shaped by a fear of the mob lingering from the anti-communism of the Cold War era.

The clashes of May 2010 revealed a deeply divided society. Even before the smoke had cleared, another battle erupted over the memory and meaning of the events. The red side pictured the event as another instance of government and military committing violence against people struggling for democracy, eliding the role of the violent elements in the movement. The yellow side painted the movement as fundamentally violent and 'terrorist', manipulated by Thaksin for personal interests, ignoring the aspirations of the majority of the participants.

Since 2004, the yellow side had called on the king to intervene in politics, adopted his birth colour as a uniform, swathed themselves in slogans about defending the king, and accused Thaksin of wishing to overthrow the monarchy. To counter Thaksin's command of the electorate, they had argued that electoral strength should be balanced by morality, and had projected the king as the symbol or instrument of a moral force. In sum, the yellow movement had exploited the symbolic power of the monarchy in public politics. This had put the institution at risk and prompted criticism. In reaction, conservative forces repeatedly insisted that the monarchy was 'above politics', while more and more cases were launched for *lèse majesté*. The number brought to court had averaged one a year during 1949 to 1956, rising to 10 a year from 1977 to 1992, and booming to 111 a year from 2005 to 2009. A few high-profile cases resulted in convictions with long prison sentences.

With the emergence of the Yellow and Red Shirt movements, more people had taken an active role in politics than ever before. Even more had consumed politics at a slight distance through the satellite television channels and local radio stations. Thailand had rather suddenly become a very political society.

AFTER MAY 2010

The Democrats had been the most successful party of the 1990s but failed to ride the upsurge of politics from below around the turn of the millennium. The party had royalist roots and, especially under the leadership of Chuan Leekpai, was identified with the bureaucracy in style and conduct. By siding with the IMF over the 1997 crisis, it lost some of its traditional support among businesspeople and the middle class. As Thaksin crafted himself as a new type of popular leader, he ridiculed the Democrats as part of an old era and old elite.

In 2005, Abhisit Vejjajiva became party leader with Korn Chatikavanij as his close colleague. Both came from Chinese-origin families that had immigrated in the 19th century, prospered in the official nobility, and become part of the social elite. Both had also been schooled in the UK at Eton and Oxford. Korn had pursued a successful career in finance, while Abhisit had been groomed by Chuan as his successor. At the very point when the people suddenly became more important in Thai politics, the Democrat leaders lacked popular appeal and a popular touch. The party not only set itself against the return of Thaksin, but also against the new political forces that seized on Thaksin as their leader. The Democrats positioned themselves as defenders of the monarchy and adopted the king's

'sufficiency economy', an approach to life based on principles of restraint and prudence that was strongly promoted by the bureaucracy but had little mass appeal.

Over 2007–08, Abhisit aligned the party with the Yellow Shirts' attempts to overthrow the Thaksinite Cabinet. When Abhisit became prime minister in December 2008 following the intervention of the courts and the army, he bore the brunt of resentment against the overthrow of an elected government and twice suffered mob attacks on his car. His government engaged in suppression of the media on a scale not seen since the military era, with pro-red papers closed, radio stations threatened, the red television occasionally disrupted, thousands of websites blocked, and a flood of cases launched under the *lèse majesté* law. During the 2010 demonstrations, Abhisit sheltered inside an army camp. After the events, he repeated the army's contention that soldiers had not killed any protesters. The Democrat Party's identification with the old institutions of bureaucracy, military, and monarchy was now complete. Its few remaining faction leaders in the upper north and northeast had melted away.

Since 2001, the party had reluctantly accepted the need to match the Thaksinite parties' 'populist' policies. Abhisit's government did not reverse any of Thaksin's major innovations except on agricultural price subsidies, and added new measures on pensions and education. But the party could not shake off its paternalist habits. A policy package intended as a pre-election sweetener was presented as a 'gift to the nation'.

After the May 2010 events, Abhisit initially resisted pressure to hold a new election until emotions had settled, but then announced a poll in July 2011. The Thaksinite party had been resurrected as Pheu Thai (For the Thai) but had yet to announce a leader and possibly the Democrats hoped to profit from their opponents' disarray. However, Pheu Thai immediately selected Yingluck Shinawatra, Thaksin's youngest sister, as leader. Thaksin said she would be his 'clone'. The party's elections slogan was 'Thaksin thinks, Pheu Thai acts'. Although Thaksin remained overseas, the election was clearly to be about his record and the popular reaction to events since the 2006 coup.

The voting reflected the polarization in the politics of the street (see [Map 7](#)). Across the upper north and northeast, constituencies gave massive majorities to Pheu Thai. Across the south, constituencies gave massive majorities to the Democrats. Minor parties lost out. More than ever before, voting was determined by emotional identification with parties. There were significantly fewer violent incidents and less evidence of vote-buying than at earlier polls. Pheu Thai gained roughly 25 per cent more votes than in

2007 and won an absolute majority of 265 of the 500 seats. The Democrats trailed with 159.

This decisive election result initially brought some reduction in tension. Yingluck devoted her maiden speech to emphasising loyalty to the monarchy, and soothed the generals with feminine charm, budget hikes, and promises of non-interference in military promotions. But opponents could not accept the return of Thaksin's influence. Remnants of the Yellow Shirts launched campaigns to overthrow her government but failed to attract significant support until November 2013, when the lower house approved an amnesty that would annul Thaksin's conviction and allow him to return. Bangkok office workers and businesspeople joined massive demonstrations in protest. Suthep Thaugsuban resigned from the parliament and Democrat Party to launch a movement to 'shutdown Bangkok' and force the Yingluck government to resign. Yingluck dissolved parliament but the Democrat Party again refused to cooperate in the subsequent elections in February 2014.

Yingluck and her supporters argued that the government should remain in power to uphold the principle of elective democracy. The protesters demanded that the government step aside to allow 'reform' in the political process. After support for the protest dwindled and the army repeatedly refused to remove the government by force, the campaign was effectively abandoned in March 2014. Yet the protests had shown the strength of urban middle class feeling against Thaksin's return and for measures to further limit the power of the parliament and executive.

Yingluck became the country's first female prime minister. She had worked earlier as an executive in the family companies and had no political experience, but she assembled a team of experienced politicians and advisers. Thaksin remained abroad but was actively involved in the selection of ministers and the framing of policy. The government returned to classic Thaksinite policies of raising incomes to stimulate demand and spending heavily on infrastructure.

CONCLUSION

The rate of change in economy and society accelerated from the 1970s onwards. The economy launched into a headlong boom and bust that transformed income levels, swelled urban areas, raised the status of business in the social order, and exposed Thailand more, both economically and culturally, to globalization.

Society became much more complex, especially with the growth of the white-collar middle class and the ranks of shuttling urban–rural migrants.

Local worlds were prised open by roads, buses, motorcycles, televisions, and the internet. A new mass society emerged, especially in the reflective panels of national media. Old unitary discourses of race, nation, history, national character, and culture were fragmented by the diversity of reality.

Politics lagged behind these changes. In the absence of a nationalist movement, war, or massive social crisis, the old institutions of monarchy, military, and bureaucracy had continued to dominate the state. Progress towards a more inclusive and democratic politics was fitful. The student–worker–peasant revolts of the 1970s brought to an end the era of military rule but were then crushed. In the aftermath, a provincial business elite was drafted into the ruling oligarchy through a parliament where admission depended heavily on money. But the bureaucracy’s power was only slightly dented, while the monarchy was promoted to an expanded role as a symbol of national unity and a refuge in times of crisis, and the military continued to claim a right to political intervention, exercised in 1991 and constantly threatened at other times. Under these cosy arrangements, the economy boomed, the environment was ravaged, and social frictions multiplied.

The financial crisis of 1997, which scythed down a third of big business groups and caused widespread social distress, undermined the legitimacy of both technocrats and provincial business politicians, opening the way to new political forces. The battered remnants of Bangkok big business wanted a state that would help them manage globalization. A largely rural mass with rising incomes, rising aspirations, and growing resentment of the society’s multiple inequities began to realize the potential of electoral politics to bring change. Thaksin Shinawatra rose to power promising to create a business-friendly state and waft Thailand into the first world. Once in power, he presented himself as a ‘leader of the people’ who would realize the dreams of both the business elite and those clamouring for a better deal.

Thaksin’s promotion of big capitalism, populism, and his own family business interests sparked a massive reaction by the old institutions of military, monarchy, and bureaucracy, joined by sections of Thailand’s insecure urban middle class. In 2006, the military again exercised its right of intervention, the judiciary was mobilized for the cause, and the middle class took to the street, leveraging the symbolic power of the monarchy. This in turn provoked Thailand’s first truly mass political movement, clad in red, demanding not the overthrow of state or capitalism, but better opportunities to benefit from capitalism and a fairer share of the resources managed by the state.

Postscript: The strong state and the well-being of the people

Since the foundation of Thailand's nation-state in the late 19th century, two traditions have evolved over its primary purpose.

The first of these began from the original formulation in the reign of King Chulalongkorn. The need for a strong absolutist state was justified to overcome external threats (colonialism) and internal disorder so that Siam could achieve 'progress' and become a significant country in the world. The right of the existing royal elite to rule this strong state was explained by history (the continuity of monarchy since Sukhothai), and by the elite's selflessness, professionalism, and monopoly of *siwilai*. The role of the nation was to be unified, passive, and obedient.

The formula was revived and updated by military dictators in the mid-20th century. Phibun and Wichit removed the monarchy from its central place, but kept the main elements of the formula intact. The need for a strong dictatorial state was justified to overcome external threats (communism) and internal threats (the Chinese) so that Siam could achieve progress/development and survive in a world of competing nations and ideologies. The right of the military elite to rule was explained by history (the Thai as a martial race), and by its selflessness, professionalism, and monopoly of force. Sarit, with help from the USA, reunited the royal and military strands of the tradition.

In this reformulation, the role of the nation had to be adjusted because of the emergence of new urban classes with their own interests and aspirations. Wichit imagined the Thai as a free people in a free-market economy with opportunities to better themselves and change their social station. Whereas the nation was invisible in royalist history, Wichit gave it an active role in 'great migrations' from the north, the cultural achievements of Sukhothai, and deeds of martial heroism. Phibun and Wichit gave the new men and women of urban Siam roles as the vanguard of progress, especially as paternal officials overseeing the mass of society, which was still judged

incapable of being modern and was thus expected to remain passive and obedient.

At the start of the 21st century, Thaksin Shinawatra and his business party again revived the formula, and also adjusted it to reflect the emergence of a national economy and mass society over the prior quarter century. The need for a strong, authoritarian state was justified to overcome external threats (globalization) and internal threats (social conflict) so that Thailand could leapfrog into the ranks of first-world countries. The right of the new business–political elite to rule this strong state was explained by its selflessness (commitment to ‘the people’), professionalism (the use of business methods), and command of the wealth needed to win elections.

Over its successive appearances, this tradition has acquired some distinctive features. It provides a cloak for rapid accumulation by the political elite – the absolutist monarchy’s accumulation of property and investments; the generals’ ability to exploit natural resources and favour business friends; and the overt and covert favours for big business under the Thai Rak Thai government. It portrays the nation both as a mystical unity (*samakkhitham*) and as a distinctly graded hierarchy in which some are more Thai, more ‘national’, than others. It tends to project a highly masculine and martial aura, and to license the exploitation of women through polygamy and its modern variants. The periods when this tradition dominates coincide with the use of state violence against the nation’s own people – the suppression of revolts in 1899–1902; Phao’s killings of political rivals in the 1950s; the massacres of 1973, 1976 and 1992; the drug campaign of 2003; and repeated violence in the peripheral areas of the hills, far south, and backward northeast.

While changing in line with the expansion of the political nation, this idea of a strong state justified by external and internal threats and by the need to progress and be internationally prominent has become the dominant tradition of Thailand’s politics.

The second, opposing tradition emerged in the aspirations of commoner intellectuals in the late 19th century, and took firmer shape in the public sphere of the early 20th. In this formula, the purpose of the nation-state is the well-being of the nation’s members. The desire to be a significant country in the world is of little or no importance. The enemy is not any threat, internal or external, but the strong-state tradition itself.

This second tradition avoids attributing to the nation any mystical unity, but instead embraces its diversity. It has rewritten history to highlight the

variety of peoples bundled together in the nation, and explode the myths of unity and continuity. It counters the assumptions of power and privilege in the strong-state tradition by promoting government based on principle, the rule of law, the importance of institutions, and especially the role of constitutions. This strategy was prefigured by the memorial of 1885 and first implemented by Pridi and the People's Party in 1932. Subsequent reiterations of this tradition have returned to the same method in 1946, 1974, and 1992.

This tradition has tended to look outwards for ideas to oppose the dominant, strong-state tradition. The commoner intellectuals of the late 19th century looked to Meiji Japan's self-strengthening movements. The early 20th-century publicists and politicians absorbed ideas from European liberalism and socialism. The intellectuals, students, and nascent urban middle class of the Cold War era drew inspiration not only from communism but also from western ideals of liberalism and democracy. Reformers in the era of globalization have taken up discourses of human rights, civil society, the ideal community, and direct democracy. This internationalism gives both strength and vulnerability. Advocates of the strong state repeatedly revert to nationalist arguments to denigrate opposing ideas as 'un-Thai'. In response, the second tradition often tries to domesticate its ideas by finding parallels within Buddhism.

In the early 2000s, Thaksin tried to embrace both traditions. While retaining his commitment to the strong state, he also embraced the goal of the people's well-being and projected himself as the only leader who could achieve this goal. But he was overstretched. His opponents shouldered him aside and reclaimed ownership of the strong state tradition. In their new formulation, the old institutions of bureaucracy, military, and monarchy needed to be re-empowered to overcome the twin threats of immoral capitalism and irresponsible populism so that Thailand would not face disaster.

Each political culture builds its own traditions about the uses of the nation-state. In Thailand, the strong-state tradition inaugurated at the birth of the nation-state has remained so influential because it has been deeply embedded by decades of dominance, and remains available for future political generations. But the latest mobilization of the strong-state tradition has faced fierce opposition based on sustained popular support. Perhaps the second tradition is now coming into its own.