

Thaksin Shinawatra and the reshaping of Thai politics

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Twice elected prime minister of Thailand at the head of his Thai Rak Thai Party, telecommunications magnate Thaksin Shinawatra was controversial in office. Since his government was overthrown by a September 2006 military coup backed by the palace, conservatives, and a broad coalition of opponents, Thaksin has remained at the centre of Thailand's continuing political turmoil. This paper examines his political legacy, both in its positive and negative forms, through a focus on the nature of political parties and electoral policies in Thailand; the role of business interests in politics; the impact of Thaksin's politics on political activism and mobilisation; populism, social welfare, and the reaction of the middle class to welfare politics; Thaksin's confrontation with the elite and the monarchy; and the developing judicialisation of politics.

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Cunning and treachery engross a great portion of the Siamese political character . . . The rulers have little or no regard to justice, while the governed, who do not expect it from them, having drunk the cup of oppression to the dregs, try to seek for some consolation in the well defined social compact which long custom has established, of which they cannot, happily, be so easily deprived as of their freedom. (James Low, 10 August 1824, in Farrington 2007, p. 84, urging the British government to colonise Siam)

Thaksin Shinawatra was elected to government at the head of his Thai Rak Thai (Thais love Thais, TRT) Party in January 2001. He and his party were re-elected in a landslide election victory in February 2005. Immediately following the latter triumph, the government faced a growing opposition. A year after the election, the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) began street demonstrations that eventually led to a military coup on 19 September 2006, backed by a range of conservatives and other Thaksin opponents, not least in the palace. The military junta claimed Thaksin's administration had led to

severe disunity . . . unprecedented before in Thai society, . . . rampant corruption, malfeasance and nepotism, . . . independent organizations had been interfered with . . . In addition, some political activities undertaken verged upon lèse-majesté against His Majesty the King who is highly respected and revered by the Thai people. (CNS 2006)

A period of military tutelage under an appointed government, with General Surayud Chulanont as prime minister, then followed. Plucked from the King's Privy Council, Surayud led an administration charged with transforming the rules of politics by instituting a new constitution and running an election which, with the TRT dissolved by the courts, was expected to result in an anti-Thaksin government. Despite the government's and military's best efforts,

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the electorate voted for pro-Thaksin parties and they formed a coalition government. Not long after, Thaksin returned to Thailand, having been in exile, mostly in the UK, since the coup.

Dominated by PAD, Thaksin's opponents soon regrouped and mounted virtually non-stop street demonstrations against a government they claimed represented the 'Thaksin regime' (Chirmsak 2009). With strongly royalist and nationalist rhetoric, the opposition attacked the incumbent government and Thaksin on several fronts. Thaksin had been banned from formal politics and a series of corruption cases against him were investigated and taken to courts by bodies appointed by and allied to the palace–military conservatives responsible for the coup. When convicted on one of these charges, Thaksin fled the country, basing himself in Dubai. Meanwhile, sometimes violent PAD demonstrations eventually saw Bangkok's airports occupied for several days before a hasty court decision dissolved the pro-Thaksin parties, effectively bringing down the government. It was replaced by a coalition led by Thailand's oldest party, the Democrat Party, allied with a few breakaway parliamentarians from the dissolved pro-Thaksin parties. This coalition was forged in negotiations brokered by the military. The result was that Thai politics remained sharply polarised and descended into violent conflicts in 2009 and 2010.

In short, from the time he formed the TRT in 1998, Thailand's politics has revolved around Thaksin. Thaksin is not a politician who is easily pigeon-holed, having changed his political tack several times. He is not a determined political ideologue. At the time he became premier, he was characterised as an economic nationalist and by the time that he was overthrown, many of his opponents labelled him a globalising neo-liberal. He has regularly been characterised as a populist saviour of the poor, while at the same time seen as a rich grifter using the state for personal gain (Nippon 2004, Pasuk and Baker 2008). Thaksin appears a political chameleon who can take on political personae that suit particular circumstances. Is this just political opportunism? Was Thaksin only seeking personal and business benefits? How should we assess Thaksin's political legacy?

As James Low, cited at the beginning of this paper, observed 186 years ago, Thai politics knows plenty of 'cunning' and 'treachery'. Thaksin was overthrown by the treachery of the military and the palace. Following the coup, Thaksin's supporters see him as being up against an establishment that refuses to dispense justice to Thaksin or those who voted for him and his party. Meanwhile, opponents view Thaksin as the embodiment of evil, cunning, and treachery, who sought to control the state and oppress the people for his own gain.

This paper seeks a more nuanced evaluation. However, before turning to an assessment of Thaksin's political legacy, some background is necessary in order to contextualise the rise of the man and the TRT.

Background

It is important to recall that Thaksin and the TRT came to power after a period of climactic transformation for Thailand and they then presided over further fundamental changes that ran the gamut of the economic, social, and political spheres.

The economic boom from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s had enormous impacts. As Thailand liberalised and the modern and industrialised sectors of the economy expanded, its people became wealthier. Many Thais benefited, although not everyone benefited equally; Thailand ranks exceptionally high in measures of inequality in the Asian region (Asian Development Bank 2007, p. 3). A notable feature of this decade of economic growth was that the benefits went beyond Bangkok where the four previous decades of growth had been concentrated, in Bangkok benefiting the Sino-Thai business and middle classes. The boom saw the rise of a provincial 'new rich' that became engaged in local and national politics.

Social change was expansive and thorough-going. Thais became better educated. They also became healthier and lived longer, leaving some of the old tropical diseases behind as

immunisation, family planning, and water supplies and sanitation improved. Thailand became a more urbanised and mobile society. Economic liberalisation also saw the society increasingly embedded in the broader global changes associated with the deepening of neo-liberal globalisation. These deep impacts brought an expansion of expectations about how the society should be structured.

In terms of politics, there was a general optimism born of the slow but steady progress towards enhanced democracy that followed the bloody suppression of a civilian uprising in May 1992 (Ockey 2004, pp. 164–170). That event saw people mass on the streets to reject the military's attempt to engineer an electoral victory following the 1991 coup and put the coup leader in the prime minister's office. After the military and the police opened fire and killed an unknown number of demonstrators, they were disgraced and sent back to the barracks. This provided the political space that allowed civilian forces to engineer considerable political reform.

The resulting 1997 Constitution seemed an appropriate outcome of civilian dominance. While it remained an elite-dominated project, debates between conservatives, royalists, politicians, civil society organisations, and liberal intellectuals saw enhanced opportunities for political participation while also creating a stronger executive and party system (see various chapters in McCargo 2002). Thaksin was fated to be the only prime minister elected under this constitution.

This is the broad context of Thaksin's rise. At the same time, it should be recalled that the TRT's first election success came on the back of enormous public dissatisfaction with a Democrat Party-led government and its economic policies. In attempting to deal with the Asian financial crisis, Thailand's deepest economic downturn in 50 years, the government had implemented policies that reflected both its own economic liberalism and the policy constraints imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Initially, these policies failed to bring the economy out of its deep recession. The government was charged with kowtowing to the IMF and foreign businesses; indeed, they stood accused of selling out the country to foreign interests (Hewison 2000b).

Thaksin and TRT were elected in part because they promised alternative policies to the 'neo-liberalism' of the Democrat Party, because they were seen as redressing the grievances of domestic capitalists and because it was believed that TRT's policies would stoke growth and rebuild the economy.

Thaksin's legacy: an assessment

In the remainder of this article, an attempt is made to assess the political legacies of Thaksin and the TRT, both positive and negative. When TRT came to office, Thaksin did not have a sparkling track record as a politician. As Ukrist (1998, pp. 69–73) points out, his initial political forays were driven by business interests and he was not particularly successful as a minister.

The assessment presented here will be controversial because it counterpoises positives with negatives. Thaksin's opponents seldom credit him with any positive contributions, while his supporters sometimes reject valid criticism of Thaksin and TRT. In all but one section, we begin with a potentially positive contribution to Thaksin's political legacy. It is important to note that this assessment cannot encompass the fluidity of the political present where Thaksin continues to loom large.

At the heart of Thai politics for a decade, Thaksin is seen in partisan and black-and-white terms. It bears recalling that, when he formed TRT in 1998, there was no indication that Thaksin was setting out to revolutionise Thailand, its economy, or its politics. What he wanted was to get policies in place that would deliver political support to the elements of the domestic business class that had survived the economic crisis. It was no coincidence that his

first cabinet included many of the leading figures in that class or that Thaksin's family's interests were among the largest at that time. More than a decade later, we may begin to assess his political legacies while acknowledging that Thaksin remains central to political debate and conflict in Thailand.

Politics, parties, and policies

In setting up TRT, Thaksin changed the way that political parties operate in Thailand. As a businessman, he used business methods to find out what the political 'market' wanted. He knew he had to have something to 'sell' to the market-electorate (Baker 2005). Significantly, TRT drew techniques from US political campaign experience and corporate marketing strategy to develop an electoral platform that came to address the aspirations of many voters. The party's surveys and focus groups were an important element in developing TRT's policies and for differentiating its brand from others parties (Pasuk and Baker 2009, pp. 63–80). Thaksin also brought in bright, relatively young, and grassroots-connected advisers who came with ideas about poverty reduction and other local-level concerns. Thaksin and TRT were able to gain and use information that permitted the party to develop policies that were to prove electorally popular (Kengkij and Hewison 2009, pp. 454–458, Pasuk and Baker 2009, pp. 80–82).

TRT developed its policies as an electoral platform that became the party's political 'brand'. Surprising many, another innovation was that Thaksin and TRT delivered their campaign promises. Thaksin's most popular campaign promises were a farmer debt moratorium, soft loans for every community, and a universal health care program. Delivering what he had promised was essential for maintaining political momentum and for boosting local consumption. It also made Thaksin personally popular.

TRT's electoral platform amounted to a new social contract (Hewison 2004). If Thaksin was to save the essentially urban-based domestic business class, TRT needed the support of voters in the populous electorates where the relatively poor and rural voters were predominant. Hence the TRT's so-called populist policies offered social welfare, income support, and ideas about how the poor might get ahead. No past government had ever taken much interest in the masses in such a positive way. In a highly unequal society, this was innovative and proved remarkably popular.

Of course, Thaksin and TRT also used some stock political methods, co-opting old-style politicians and small parties, developing local political networks, and splashing money about. Thaksin the entrepreneur could also draw on older models. As an ex-policeman, he sometimes became the tough leader. For example, he once warned: 'I can still carry a gun and pull the trigger. Before I die I want to kill our enemies first, and these are poverty, drugs and corruption' (cited in Symonds 2001, n.p.). After several years of weak leadership, this toughness was a political asset. This toughness also led to authoritarianism and a neglect of human rights (Connors 2009).

TRT emphasised inclusiveness, offering 'new thinking, new ways, for all Thais'. When coupled with a mildly nationalist rhetoric and promises to poor and rural voters, TRT seemed to promise assistance to all those suffering from the economic slump. Many business people appreciated this support and the TRT's policies also resonated with the developing political desires of the downtrodden. The agenda was also appealing to a range of intellectuals and leaders of civil society groups who had abandoned the Democrat Party and attacked its economic policies (Hewison 2000a).

An often overlooked and essentially positive change that Thaksin was able to bring was a reduction in the power of many of the local political and economic godfathers – the *chao pho*. The economic crisis had hurt these local notables who had long influenced national-level

politics through their sponsorship of local members of parliament. Thaksin was one of the few business people who remained cashed-up after the crisis, and this facilitated his party and its coalition building, giving Thaksin and TRT considerable space for manoeuvre. As Pasuk and Baker (2009, p. 88) observe, 'Many candidates from influential local families that failed to enter TRT were massacred at the [2001] polls; . . . those that did enter TRT had a high chance of victory'. Entering TRT did not guarantee that these local power brokers would be highly influential. Some, like Buriram's Newin Chidchob, did remain powerful but by developing a dominant party, Thaksin was able to submerge them in his political party, reducing their political sway.

With immense personal popularity, a dominant party, a recovering economy, and more promises to the poor, TRT's re-election in 2005 was to be expected. Thaksin was the first Thai prime minister to be re-elected at the head of a political party that controlled parliament in its own right.

This potentially positive outcome for Thailand's political development was, however, undermined by the fact that TRT not only won, but it trounced its rivals and essentially made parliament a place for TRT to talk shop and process its legislation. An arrogant and authoritarian streak became more pronounced as the government was freed of many of the constraints of parliamentary and independent scrutiny. For example, the government was able to prevent a negative report from the National Human Rights Commission reaching parliament, avoided censure by the National Counter Corruption Commission, and gained a considerable hold over a supposedly independent Senate (Pasuk and Baker 2009, p. 96).

This parliamentary power and evident popularity sent shockwaves through the conservative establishment. The result was that potentially positive developments came to be wound back by a combination of Thaksin's political flaws and by a conservative reaction against him and his party. Following the coup, in their efforts to prevent Thaksin from returning to power or ever having a strong prime minister emerge again, the military junta's constitutional drafting committee drafted the 2007 Constitution to weaken political parties, the executive, politicians, and parliament. This means that the parliament has again become a place of shifting loyalties. Coalition governments are again the norm, so party support is tenuous and expensive as smaller parties negotiate cabinet seats and other perquisites that bolster their coffers and position them for expensive elections and the next round of coalition horse-trading. For all the criticism of Thaksin's alleged vote-buying in the elections he won, it is the conservatives and their military guard who re-established constitutional rules that again make money politics paramount. This is not as ironic as it might seem, for money politics keeps parliament weak and dependent, and real political power resides with traditional, repressive, and hierarchical institutions. Coalition building creates a path back for the local-level political dinosaurs. A less impatient and a more compromising approach by Thaksin may have provoked less resistance to TRT innovations.

Business and politics

As noted above, Thaksin's task in forming TRT, at least initially, was as a vehicle to represent the interests of domestic capital and to rebuild, reshape, and support this class. To do this, Thaksin linked with business people who had been his supporters but also with some who had once been his competitors. The steep economic decline of 1997–1998 was one of the stimulants for this realignment. As Baker (2005) shows, Thaksin was able to come to arrangements with many former business rivals and built powerful business and political alliances that allowed him to continue to prosper in business and, in parallel, develop his political ambitions. It is important to note that some business people had been deeply involved in parliamentary

politics previously. However, these were mainly the *chao pho*-provincial godfather figures discussed above, badly damaged by the economic crisis, and sidelined from political activity.

What Thaksin did was make big, Bangkok-based, business groups more politically prominent, bringing them out of the political shadows and placing them front-and-centre on the political stage with significant business groups represented at cabinet level. This movement of members of the metropolitan business elite into politics was aided by the 1997 Constitution that made it more palatable for the business elite to become politicians by introducing a party list system that meant that candidates could avoid the grubbier aspects of campaigning. Many of these business people joined TRT and were seen in Thaksin's first cabinet, with business leaders from Thaksin's Shin Corporation, Jasmine, Charoen Phokphand, Bangkok Entertainment, the Thai Military Bank, Thai Summit, and others all represented.

Thaksin the businessman-cum-politician was marketed as a 'new entrepreneur' – his core assets were in telecommunications – who would be a 'new politician', decisive and with new ideas. With his policies for the poor, Thaksin was also presented as a tycoon who seemed to 'have a heart'. Many voters hoped that this successful 'new entrepreneur' would bring back the good economic times.

On the one hand, this is a positive legacy for it removed the proxy relationship some business people had had with politicians in the past, meaning that business interests were, potentially, subject to greater scrutiny and transparency in their political linkages. On the other hand, the movement of big business into politics inevitably saw the dominance of particular business groups and unleashed immense conflicts of interest. Thaksin himself seemed unable to distinguish between personal and family interests and those of the state. It is usually assumed that Thaksin and his own family's businesses did well while he was the prime minister. Pasuk and Baker (2009, p. 224) have some calculations that indicate that in 2003, the stock market value of the family's five listed enterprises almost tripled to 425 billion baht in a period where the overall market rise was 117%. Even so, a swathe of accusations pointed to special interests benefiting, most spectacularly in the sale of Shin Corp to the Singaporean government's Temasek Holdings. The odour of nepotism and conflict of interest was remarkably strong. Indeed, the Supreme Court Criminal Division for Persons Holding Political Positions (2010) in a controversial decision in February 2010 decided that Thaksin and his family had benefited from various deals done while he was premier to the tune of US\$1.4 billion, and returned this amount from the Shinawatra family to the state's coffers.

So while Thaksin succeeded in bringing big business to the political stage, this saw business interests entwine with political office in ways that made it difficult for reasonable observers to conclude that there was sufficient transparency or that favourites were not benefiting from political alliances.

Political activists and political mobilisation

Many of TRT's policies that were attractive to the electorate were developed with the support and involvement of activists with ties to non-governmental organisations and civil society organisations. Bringing representatives of civil society into policy-making processes of a political party were an innovative strategy. Initially, Thaksin and TRT developed linkages with those known as 'Octobrists'. Mostly student activists from the 1973 to 1976 period of open politics, sandwiched between military-dominated regimes, have significant political and intellectual credibility because they campaigned against authoritarianism and military rule. Many of them had also been attracted to socialist ideas and were committed to bettering the lives of the poor, especially farmers (Kengkij and Hewison 2009, p. 454). More radically, some promoted the political participation of the working and peasant classes. Bringing this experience and

credibility to TRT allowed the party to harness 'grassroots' ideas to its policy-making (Pasuk and Baker 2009, pp. 80–82).

This was an important innovation but it eventually led to serious splits within and between civil society organisations that will take years to overcome. While some Octobrists stayed with Thaksin, TRT and its successor parties, many were always suspicious of the businessman-turned-politician. As a political reaction developed, many of these activists swung away from TRT, attacking Thaksin's authoritarian turn, his conflicts of interests, and his support for deeper capitalist renovation of the economy. Those turning against Thaksin became the intellectual ballast of the PAD. Their political prestige and inspiring speeches drew the middle class to the anti-Thaksin movement.

It is true that these activists and their organisations had never been monolithic in their causes, ideology, or politics. Likewise, PAD had several factions. However, PAD's organisation and rhetoric came to be dominated by royalists drawn from the middle classes and elite, and led by media tycoon Sondhi Limthongkul. Sondhi's group was supported by intellectuals, elements of the military, some unions, and had a voice through Sondhi's media outlets. The activist group was outwitted and out-organised, and were unable to build a broader alliance that would have allowed a civil society 'voice' to be heard. As the struggle to oust Thaksin became increasingly bitter and street demonstrations expanded, PAD's royalist faction had control, developing an ultra-nationalist doctrine that eventually saw some of the activists break away.

The organisations that were led by the activists that became tied to PAD have been seriously damaged by their political side-taking and the splits that resulted. Many of these activists broke with their grassroots support, much of which remained firmly with Thaksin (Somchai 2008). A potentially more negative outcome has been deep political cynicism. Many have concluded that all politicians are corrupt, elections are essentially 'undemocratic' as they are dominated by vote-buying, and now believe that 'real democracy' can only be achieved through moral and ethical rule (Thongchai 2008, p. 25). This cynicism allows for political views that reject parliamentary democracy, demean the role of the voting public, and provide succour to potential authoritarian leaders who disingenuously claim high moral and ethical standards.

At the broader level of political mobilisation, TRT's need for votes and the imperative to deliver on its electoral promises have transformed the meaning of voting as a form of political participation. A much larger number of voters apparently began to feel that their vote meant something and could make a difference to the political representation they received. While this may have been no more than a feeling, it was palpable, especially in rural areas, where voter turnout was consistently high. Voters also seemed prepared to stay the course with elections, even in the face of the repeated rejection of the votes they cast. TRT, having won in 2005, was thrown out by the coup and then the party was dissolved by the judiciary using new laws applied retrospectively. The April 2006 election was annulled. Finally, the unexpected electoral victory by pro-Thaksin parties in December 2007 was rejected by a rejuvenated PAD engaging in street politics, backroom manoeuvring, and finally by the judiciary, which again dissolved the parties that had won an election. The military, the Bangkok-centred middle class, intellectuals, royalists, and the Democrat Party have all worked to undermine the outcome of popular votes. The dogged resolve voters have displayed, seemingly determined to make a majority voice count, might be considered a positive outcome from a highly polarising period of political turmoil.

There is also a negative aspect to this participation through support for elections in the political reaction against Thaksin and the political cynicism noted above. The arguments used by those who have wanted to discount the popular mandate have been that voting is not the be all and end all of democratic systems. Former prime minister and senior royalist Anand

Punyarachun (2008, p. 274) has opined: 'I never thought that some Westerners would equate elections with democracy'. Anand, like many of his conservative brethren, talked about checks and balances, and increased role for civil society, the need for informed voter decision-making, and so on. They identified these features of the government with the 1997 Constitution and believed that Thaksin used, flouted, and ignored these provisions for his own benefit. While there is much truth to this assessment, the rejection of the significance of votes and elections is regressive. The discourse explaining recent election results as deriving solely from the votes of the duped, paid, ill-educated, or ignorant is demeaning (Somchai 2008, Walker 2008; see *Thai Rath*, 23 June 2008, pp. 1, 5). Denigrating voters and their decisions is unlikely to enhance democratic development.

At the same time, a different kind of political mobilisation has become highly effective. The rejection of Thaksin by the PAD, then by the military and associated conservative forces, and then by judicial decisions has witnessed a political mobilisation of people, both for and against Thaksin. Political mobilisation is potentially empowering. However, much of this mobilisation has relied on what were initially PAD innovations – also adopted by the pro-Thaksin red shirts – of street-based politics, often uncivil activism, and extreme partisanship, seen in demonstrations and rallies but most especially in the media. Some view street-based politics as an outgrowth of the development of civil society movements in Thailand. But not all social movements promote democratic principles or enhanced human rights; they can easily promote the interests of authoritarian elites (Rodan 1996). Indeed, PAD has evidenced xenophobic nationalism and has supported regressive political change through its support for the military, monarchism, and similar conservative forces (Hewison 2009).

Populism, social welfare, and the middle class

As a middle-income country, the social welfare innovations that the Thaksin government implemented stand out as a remarkable achievement. The 'populist policies' introduced by TRT owed much to the political and policy-making advances mentioned above. The measures included a 30-baht health care scheme, an expansion of the existing social security fund, and minor pension innovations. As noted above, the health care scheme was particularly attractive with voters, who would pay just 30 baht per doctor or hospital visit at state-funded institutions. So popular and emblematic was this scheme that the military-backed regime that came to power after the coup not only kept it, and made it free. Most other elements of this developing social welfare system have been kept by post-TRT governments. Thaksin was not ideologically driven to create this nascent welfare system. At least in the beginning, the motivation was getting the votes required to elect his party to government. This required the new social contract mentioned earlier.

One of the criticisms of Thaksin's social welfare innovations was that the government underfunded them. Indeed, social welfare is often expensive and governments must find ways of funding it. Increased taxes are a common solution. Increased taxation can create political opposition. In the Thai case, the opposition to Thaksin's social welfare came from the middle class. This backlash was not so much about increased taxation but to improved tax collection. Part of the rhetoric that attracted the middle class to PAD was the claim that Thaksin was squeezing the middle class for his own political and economic benefit. The argument was that the wealthy did not pay tax, the example being Thaksin's tax-free sale of the Shin Corporation. Neither, it was argued, did the poor pay taxes. They did, of course, but this was not the point of the political argument. Hence, it was said that middle-class taxes kept corrupt politicians in power through policies that appealed to poor voters, while allowing Thaksin and his cronies to get wealthier. Worse, these politicians stayed in power by buying the votes from

the ignorant and poor masses (Pasuk and Baker 2009, pp. 264–265). Worse still, these corrupt politicians then continued to support the lazy poor, making them lazier still. Some of the more radical activists called for a tax revolt against the TRT government. While social welfare has continued, there is a deep suspicion among the middle class.

This suspicion is emblematic of a darker development in middle-class politics. The steady progress towards enhanced democracy after the bloody civilian uprising of May 1992 is often seen as evidence of the democratic aspirations of the middle class. However, the events since 2001 have demonstrated that the middle class is composed of many who can only be described as ‘contingent democrats’, supporting democratic forms when it suits their interests. The evidence for this interests-based politics is seen in the welcome members of this class accorded Thaksin when he developed TRT. That welcome was only surpassed by the ecstatic reception the same people accorded the military and their so-called ‘good coup’ in 2006.

That there is now a middle-class rejection of electoral politics as ‘undemocratic’ is an evidence of the palpable fear of allowing the rural masses ‘too much’ participation in politics. They are rejected as ignorant, uneducated, and easily bought. The darkest side of this development is the opportunities this kind of politics creates for authoritarian policies.

Confronting the ‘old oligarchy’ and the monarchy

To deliver on his new social contract, the ever impatient Thaksin needed to shake up the glacially slow and self-interested bureaucracy, making it more responsive to (his) politicians and to the public more broadly. To remain electorally popular, TRT needed the bureaucracy to deliver government services more efficiently. In a bureaucracy that had for decades been attuned to controlling the population, this was an innovative approach.

Thaksin reshuffled and restructured ministries, promoted favourites, and offered incentives that were identified by some as overly reliant on corporate models. Of course, shaking up the bureaucracy created opposition. A number of Thaksin’s advisers expected this. They had been in Chatichai Choonhavan’s government, overthrown by the 1991 coup and knew that that government had failed to gain control over the military and bureaucracy. Thaksin, while eager for change, was aware of the political risks involved, especially as the senior levels of the military and civil bureaucracies were a part of what Duncan McCargo (2005) has termed the ‘network monarchy’. There is no doubt that Thaksin came into conflict with the palace’s network, maintained by the former prime minister and president of the King’s Privy Council, General Prem Tinsulanonda.

More broadly, Thaksin came to be pitted against the ‘old oligarchy’. Thaksin’s downfall has seen a remarkable demonstration of how elite politics operates in Thailand. In the past there were accusations of murky influences in the political background; we now see a more complex political picture far more clearly. When commentators observe the power of the ‘old elite’, ‘old oligarchy’ or ‘the establishment’ in Thailand, this is not a scientific identification. Rather it is drawing attention to a set of persons and arrangements that have existed to ‘manage’ politics without those people and arrangements having to be a visible element of the hurley-burley of political machinations. Royals, aristocrats, old Sino-Thai money, trusted intellectuals, judges, and some senior military, police, and administrators have all been involved. Again, we might loosely apply McCargo’s term ‘network monarchy’ to this group. It is an advance that these puppet-masters are now recognised as political players.

As the country emerged from economic recession and faced increased international economic rivalry, the Thaksin government’s task was to upgrade Thailand’s capitalism and make it more efficient and competitive (Pansak 2004). Such an upgrading required a rearrangement of Thailand’s power structure. One of his aides, Jakrapob Penkair (2007) explains that

Thaksin was not totally aware of the consequences of this. Jakrapob claims that Thaksin 'sleepwalked' into his challenge to the 'patronage system', adding '... he didn't launch those policies philosophically. He simply wanted to do his job. He wants to be liked ... He wants to be a useful rich man.'

It might be thought that Thaksin, as a fourth-generation Sino-Thai, fabulously rich, married to a police general's daughter, with a doctorate and training in military and police institutions, would easily fit into this elite. However, his egoism, drive, aggression, and his failure to adequately observe the traditional hierarchies of the Thai power structure earned him multiple enemies and identified him as a danger to the old oligarchy. Thaksin's politics eventually brought the whole array of conservative, hierarchical, and authoritarian forces together in opposition to Thaksin personally and to his government.

Ultimately, the 2006 coup was about opposing the changes Thaksin wanted and preserving the status quo that involved the dominance of the old oligarchy. To take down Thaksin and to overcome the challenge he posed, the old oligarchy had to become more actively politically engaged than it had been for about three decades. This means that the old oligarchy needed to re-establish its position. That it is now resurgent is the problem that is now dragging on Thai politics. Thaksin was a force for bringing these conservative, hierarchical, and authoritarian forces together and has undone the elite-dominated but more liberal political compromise that was negotiated after the 1992 uprising against the military and symbolised in the 1997 Constitution (Connors 2003, Hewison 2007, pp. 931–939). The military, having lost considerable prestige in 1992, is back, feted by the middle class when it led its 2006 coup and for its suppression of pro-Thaksin demonstrators in April 2009. The continual call to protect the monarchy for reasons of 'national security' and the continued censorship associated with this protection is another example of how the conservative ballast of politics has been reinforced.

A further significant outcome of the coup and the period of military-backed government under Surayud and the Democrat Party-led coalition that was engineered into place in the late 2008 has been the resurgence of the bureaucracy and its old, controlling, dominating ways. Backed by the power of the military and the changes made in the military's 2007 Constitution, much has been done to undermine democratic development and entrench authoritarianism.

Of course, the lynchpin of the conservative oligarchy is the monarchy. For decades associated with the state's repressive apparatus, as the present reign extended beyond 60 years, the King has been consciously elevated to an inviolable position. In the twilight weeks before the 2006 coup, the celebrations of the present King's 60th year on the throne gave the appearance of a monarchy that was at a pinnacle of its prestige. One of the most remarkable achievements of the old oligarchy's battle with Thaksin is the rapid crumbling of this prestige and the identification of the monarchy as a politicised institution. Royal propaganda has long claimed that the monarchy is 'above politics', but few now accept this.

Thaksin had a prickly relationship with the palace. Like all Thai politicians, Thaksin professed his undying loyalty to the throne and the King. However, Thaksin's policies, politics, style, and popularity came together in such a way that they were seen as posing a challenge to the monarchy. The desire to increase his family's wealth is often seen to have been Thaksin's primary motivation for entering politics. He is criticised for fostering cronyism and engaging in 'big money politics' (Pasuk and Baker 2009, p. 97). This propensity challenged the special status of Crown Property Bureau, the monarchy's investment arm. The Bureau and associated royal enterprises receive various forms of state benefit, including considerable tax exemptions on some assets. Porphant Ouyyanont (2008) has shown that, with assets of US\$28 billion in 2005, the Bureau dwarfed the Shinawatra family's wealth. While royal businesses both

co-operated and competed with Shinawatra companies, Thaksin's combination of wealth and political power was especially challenging for the managers of royal businesses.

Politically, as already noted, Thaksin challenged the network monarchy. Arguably, however, the most significant contest between Thaksin and the palace was for the hearts and minds of the masses. Long a core ideological component of the monarchy's position, the King is constantly portrayed as *the* champion of the downtrodden, with the palace's rural development projects being symbolic of the monarch's connection to the rural masses (Royal Development Projects Board 1997). The Palace propaganda shows the King as *the* saviour of poor peasants, through highly publicised notions of sufficiency – doing better with what one already has – and equally prominent distributions of palace charity. Thaksin offered a very different approach to the same constituency. His party emphasised 'getting ahead', producing for the market and fostered entrepreneurialism at all levels of society (Pansak 2004). At the same time, state-run social welfare programmes challenged the King's well-known opposition to state welfare. As a result, conservatives and royalists rejected Thaksin's mix of social welfare and grassroots capitalism and his enormous popularity among the monarchy's self-claimed constituency.

This popularity was vividly demonstrated in the 2005 election victory. As Ockey (2004, p. 183) perceptively noted before the coup, '[c]onservative royalists fear that allowing a political leader to develop a truly national constituency would mean competition with the monarchy, which they see as dangerous'. Royalists imagined a diminution of the monarchy's role and centrality. In addition, the idea that voting could be seen as a political tool by 'small people' challenged to conservative and royalist notions about how politics should operate. In public speeches, and apparently also in private audiences, the King repeatedly chastised Thaksin and his government (Pasuk and Baker 2009, pp. 160, 228, 243, 257).

The palace was seen to be deeply involved in the coup and has been at the centre of the political stage since. While repeatedly denied by governments, the military, and the palace, the leadership of the anti-Thaksin movement was in the palace hands from the time the King declared the results of the opposition-boycotted April 2006 election problematic and called on the judiciary to sort it out. Privy Council President Prem made highly publicised speeches criticising Thaksin indicating that the palace wanted him out. Prem, supported by other privy councillors, visited various military camps and academies demanding loyalty to the King rather than the government. Reports immediately following the coup explain how palace figures were involved in coup planning and the significance of royal support and post-coup blessings for the coup leaders (Kavi 2006, Wassana 2006). A few months after the 2006 coup, the King praised the junta-appointed government composed of aged men with links to the palace and the military and headed by a privy councillor, saying: 'Old people who have experience can use their experience to help other people . . . People who have no experience can make the country go bankrupt . . . People who have no experience have ruined the country' (Anonymous 2006).

Since then, the locus of political struggle has been the palace. The opposition to the Democrat Party-led coalition government, much of it pro-Thaksin, has made it clear that their fight is against what they call *amat* or the union of privilege and royalists. They have continually attacked Prem and other privy councillors. There has also been a huge spike in critical material about the monarchy, some of it in print but most especially through the internet. Censoring this criticism and opposing and repressing those who are identified as challenging the monarchy and palace has been a central task of the Democrat Party-led government. Prem has repeatedly made it clear that Thaksin has to be opposed and the royalist Democrat Party supported. The monarchy now occupies the centre of political debate and struggle (Hewison 2009). It will never be the same again for the palace and the monarchy.

Judicialisation

Abhisit Vejjajiva, who became the prime minister at the end of 2008 with the support of conservatives and the anti-Thaksin movement, repeatedly invokes the idea of the 'rule of law' in explaining his government's actions. This represents a reaction against Thaksin, who was viewed by his opponents as being slippery on matters of law. Indeed, since the 2006 coup, Thaksin has been entangled in legal cases that have banned him from formal politics, dissolved his party, sentenced him to 2-years' jail, removed a substantial proportion of his wealth, and continue to threaten even more jail terms and financial losses. Many of his supporters have also found themselves banned from participation in formal politics and have faced numerous other charges and harassment.

The sudden expansion of the powers, role, and use of the judiciary – meaning the courts and other watchdog bodies established under the 1997 and 2007 constitutions – is identified as beginning a process of judicialisation (Ginsburg 2008, Leyland 2009). The big boost to this process was the King's April 2006 intervention, discussed above. Since the coup, the assertiveness of the judiciary has been especially noticeable. As Pasuk and Baker observe, a more assertive judiciary could be a positive development. However, a highly interventionist judiciary during periods of political conflict can lead to charges of political bias. They observe that, much of Thailand's recent judicial activism 'could be construed as politics by other means ...' (Pasuk and Baker 2008, p. 8). Indeed, the Democrat Party's coalition government only came to power after a plethora of legal moves – some have called it a judicial coup – that eventually made it impossible for the government elected in the late 2007 to remain in power. The judiciary's actions brought down several ministers, convicted Thaksin and members of his family on relatively minor charges, banned four political parties that had all had electoral success, and brought down an elected government in 2007. Many cases remain in process and many others are being considered by prosecutors.

It might be argued that these actions represent a flowering of a somnolent judiciary enforcing the rule of law. However, as the anti-Thaksin cases progressed, there was a noticeable reluctance to progress legal action against government allies and their cases have been left alone while ministers and intellectuals spoke in support of government allies who flagrantly broke the law. This perceived political bias, which targets Thaksin and the so-called Thaksin regime, is used by the opposition to expose 'double standards' (*song mattrathan*) within the government. The politicisation of the judiciary is seen as an obstacle to political progress.

Further embedding the judiciary in political processes, the 2007 Constitution, has increased its role in selecting members of a range of politically significant bodies, not least the appointed members of the Senate. As Ginsburg (2008, p. 31) observes, the shift in constitutional power means that '[u]nelected technocratic guardians are deciding who governs ...' and this means that these '... institutions are themselves transformed by their new, high-profile mandates'. The seeming technocratic structure of the legal decision-making marks a judicialised politics.

Conclusion

In assessing his legacy it would be insufficient to consider only the outcome of Thaksin's momentous contest with conservatives and royalists. Whatever the final outcome of the conservative roll back of the 'Thaksin regime' and opposition to it remains true that Thaksin has reshaped Thailand's politics. Arguably, his most thorough-going contribution was the embedding of ideas regarding state welfare. Subsequent governments have viewed welfare as essential for winning political support from the grassroots. In a very tangible way, the political commitment to social welfare is recognition of the electoral power of

the 'masses'. More significantly, a power of numbers has been demonstrated. Nobody – party, government, bureaucracy, or military – can ignore the 'masses' or simply seek to control them.

The past decade has also seen a notable political mobilisation. The now ubiquitous street politics may sometimes be uncivil, but there has been a mobilisation in other areas as well. Voting, community radio, political publications, and all kinds of discussion and activism have expanded. The downside is that there has also been a rise in political cynicism, particularly among the middle class.

TRT demonstrated that, in elections and in garnering political support, having policies matter. Political parties of the past often came up with policies but did little to implement them when in power. Thaksin and his party showed how powerful policy ideas could be, especially when developed in consultation with those with good links to the grassroots, and where delivery was timely. While there is some post-TRT retrogression on this, it seems unlikely that any significant party can completely ignore these political lessons.

Less tangible but equally important for political development, the period of the last decade has opened debates and revealed power structures as never before. The monarchy will never be the same and political debate in Thailand has changed. The expansion of the media noted above is limited by bans, censorship, and self-censorship related to the monarchy. Even so, a critical (and sometimes profane and salacious) commentary circulates widely via email, the internet, and underground publications. This inevitably means that the power of the network monarchy has been made more transparent. Just as Thaksin brought business people into politics, this exposure of the power structure potentially makes politics more competitive.

Thaksin has sometimes been compared with Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. Commenting on the Italian leader, Umberto Eco (2009) observes that:

History is rich with adventurous men, long on charisma, with a highly developed instinct for their own interests, who have pursued personal power – bypassing parliaments and constitutions, distributing favours to their minions, and conflating their own desires with the interests of the community.

Many would see these traits in Thaksin. But how many would agree with Eco when he suggests that these leaders emerge because their society permits them to develop and rule? Eco asks, 'why should we blame the man rather than the society which has allowed him to have his way?'. While individuals bear responsibility for their actions, it is true that Thaksin's rise to power owed much to the social, political, and economic changes of the 1990s.

The economic crisis of 1997–1998 so threatened were the old oligarchy and domestic capitalists that they welcomed Thaksin as their political saviour. Post-1992 political reform managed by 'liberal royalists', created the institutional circumstances for a strong capitalist political party to rule (Connors 2009, pp. 2–3). But once the fear of economic destruction had passed, the old oligarchy began to see that they had created a political 'monster' that they could not bear. Not only was Thaksin a strong and brash prime minister, but his party's new social contract unleashed the 'masses' who had long been controlled by the bureaucracy, the military, royalist ideology, and a political system that had never permitted them a voice. This may not have been a political or social revolution, but it must have seemed like one to an elite that had always held Thailand's political and social power. It was made clear that no major changes were to be permitted to this basic power structure. Ultimately, though, this elite project has been undermined. The conditions which brought a flawed politician like Thaksin to power in 2001 were not of his own making, but the outcomes of his decade of political prominence means Thaksin's blemished impact will be felt well beyond the political crisis that persists in 2010.

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