1 Introduction

Power, oppositions and democratisation

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At the end of the 1980s, the political and economic future was looking good for Thailand, despite the economic downturn of the mid-1980s and two failed military coups in 1981 and 1985. The economy had again surged, with double-digit growth, and, for the first time since 1976, the country had an elected government headed by a prime minister who was an elected member of parliament (MP). Corruption was discussed, as it had been with almost all governments since 1945, but, in the context of rapid growth, it was not perceived as a major issue.

Chavit Choonhavan came to the prime ministership following the 1988 election and after the surprise retirement of General Prem Tinsulanonda, the unelected incumbent from 1980. Prem withdrew after enormous pressure from various groups and political parties demanding that the leader be drawn from the ranks of MPs. While this may appear an unremarkable event, at the time many saw it as a victory on the path to democracy. As events unfolded, it was to prove a precursor to a major turning-point in Thailand’s political development.

Although he came from the rightist Chart Thai Party, Chavit Choonhavan seemed to accept that he and his government had an historical role to play in enhancing democratic development, and he challenged continually Thailand’s conservative state. In particular, he took steps to move decision-making away from the civil and military bureaucracy and into the hands of elected politicians. The politicians seemed to think that their time had arrived, and pushed the military conservatives to the brink. The military rattled their swords and manoeuvred against the government, and in 1991 could stand the perceived insults and moves against its perquisites no longer. Led by Class 5 graduates of the military academy, a coup threw out Chavit’s government, the constitution and the parliament.

At first, many were pleased to see the end of a corrupt civilian government. However, it soon became clear that the military was not simply cleaning up politics and then returning to the barracks. Despite the installation of a respected government of business people and technocrats, demonstrations demanding the reintroduction of constitutional rule began and grew in intensity, with the press generally supportive of these calls.
Elections were brought on, but the result confirmed that the military was not about to relinquish its control, and was, in fact, further entrenching the conservative polity (see Hewison 1993a). It installed its own unelected prime minister, General Suchinda Krapayoon, and set about establishing a constitution which gave the civil and military bureaucracy extensive powers.

The opposition movement, which had grown steadily, suddenly exploded. In May 1992 the streets of Bangkok witnessed the most extreme political violence since October 1976, as hundreds of thousands of Bangkokers – with people from all walks of life, and including business people and the middle classes – rose against the military. The world watched CNN and the BBC in horror as what had, initially, been a well-organised and non-violent confrontation co-ordinated by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) degenerated into chaos as the military perpetrated violent attacks on demonstrators they branded as communists. Over five days viewers saw indiscriminate shootings and brutalities committed against ordinary people and even against medical professionals who were treating the injured. They also witnessed remarkable bravery and resoluteness in the face of fully armed troops.

As the violence peaked and a complete breakdown of political order threatened, pictures were broadcast of then Prime Minister Suchinda and one of the leaders of the demonstrators, Major-General Chamlong Srimuang, prostrate before King Bhumibol Adulyadej as he chided them and demanded an end to the disorder.

The calling of new elections and the promise of a revised constitution offered a way forward in these circumstances. However, the issues which gave rise to the events of 1992 were not adequately addressed. This has been demonstrated by the fact that the period since September 1992 has seen three elected governments – those led by Chuan Leekpai (elected in September 1992), Banharn Silpa-archa (July 1995) and retired Army Commander General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh (November 1996). Both Chuan’s and Banharn’s governments fell amid accusations of corruption. The three elections of the period have seen money politics dominate, with up to 17 billion baht being spent during the 1995 campaign and up to a massive 25–30 billion in 1996. Parliamentary politics, while apparently established, is in danger of leading to ‘revolving door’ government as parties vie for their place at the cabinet table, which itself looks increasingly like a cash dispensing machine as the government parties scramble to recoup their investments in election campaigning. In addition, a pattern has emerged whereby the voting patterns of Bangkok and rural electorates appear different. Bangkok voters blame rural voters for electing corrupt governments and are increasingly likely to view the electoral system as being loaded against the emergence of efficient and clean government.

While the tumultuous events of 1992 were an initial stimulus to the chapters presented in this collection, the questions which have exercised the authors are wider. The essential issue is whether the basic nature of Thailand’s politics has been challenged and changed irrevocably. Has a new path been taken? Has the vicious cycle of politics – coup, handover to unstable parliamentary rule, ended by another coup – been broken? Has civil society developed to the stage where it acts as a counterweight to the state? What are the elements of this civil society which challenge the conservative polity? Have civilian politicians and the electoral process played a significant role in challenging the conservative polity led by the military – can they in the future? Is the elected legislature likely to become the centre of democratic politics or will it remain unrepresentative? Will it challenge the role of technocrats in policy-making? Will participatory institutions be located outside the system of electoral politics, in NGOs and social movements? Can the gap – in all senses of the word – between Bangkok and rural areas be bridged?

Questions like these have not been commonly asked by those who study Thailand’s politics simply because they have not been on the theoretical agenda. Prior to examining the course of modern politics and providing the necessary backdrop for the chapters, it is appropriate to provide an overview of approaches to political studies of Thailand.

**APPROACHES TO POLITICS**

Until relatively recently, there has been a significant consensus in the study of Thailand’s political system. Most analysts have agreed that the system could be considered a ‘bureaucratic polity’. Derived from a seminal work by Fred Riggs (1966), the bureaucratic polity model used by Riggs and by his followers – both Thai and Western – is fundamentally derived from Western theories of society and politics, specifically modernisation theory and its antecedents. A challenge to the modernisation approach emerged in the early 1980s. It drew on two sources: first, a developing ‘school’ of analysts interested in radical political economy; and second, the recognition that the modernisation approach and the bureaucratic polity model had become irrelevant to Thailand’s political and economic realities.

In developing this collection, there has been no intention to include authors from any particular theoretical position, although all have clearly recognised the limitations of the modernisation approach which has been delineated in recent years. It is appropriate to provide a brief description and critique of modernisation-influenced approaches prior to a discussion of competing models.

**Modernisation and consensus on politics**

Prior to the publication of Riggs’s book, the major work on post-war Thai politics was by David Wilson (1962). His work provided the essential background to the model of the bureaucratic polity. While Wilson had observed
a fluid political situation in the late 1950s, he preferred to emphasise order and consensus in his analysis. He noted that there were few extra-bureaucratic inputs into the political system, and considered that the bureaucracy – civil and military – had become the totality of politics. The bureaucracy itself was dominated by competition between powerful cliques jockeying for the highest offices and their perquisites (Wilson 1962: 278). The vast mass of the population was uninterested in politics; indeed, they were apolitical. Wilson explained this arrangement in cultural terms. He described Thais as individualistic and status-conscious, albeit within a loose social structure, driven by the Buddhist desire for the accumulation of personal merit and with the security of substantial natural resources (ibid.: 46–7). These factors worked against the development of community solidarity and gave little impetus to the development of political interest; hence, the politised elite could dominate. In addition, the masses – mostly farmers – deferred to the ruling elite.

Wilson’s work established a set of concerns which informed many future social and political studies: loose social structure, political passivity, military and bureaucratic domination of politics, the significance of culture and personality, the role of tradition, and weak extra-bureaucratic influences. The cement of society was to be found in traditional, powerful and pervasive patron–client relations. For example, Neher (1981: 121) argues that patron–client relations play a major role in the integration of society. Conflict was not a major defining characteristic of political activity, which was strongly influenced by passivity, individuality and deference.

In going beyond Wilson’s approach, Riggs attempted to develop a complete structural-functional model, in line with developments within modernisation theory. Riggs establishes two ideal types of society: the traditional or ‘fused’ society at one end of the development spectrum and the modern or ‘diffracted’ society at the other. In traditional society, a single structure – a repetitive pattern of behaviour – may perform many functions, while in modern society structures are functionally specific (Riggs 1961: 19). Thailand is identified as a ‘prismatic’ society, which lies somewhere between these two ideal types, where the bureaucratic polity is defined as a ‘system of government that is neither “traditional” nor “modern” in character’ (Riggs 1966: 11).

Using this model, Riggs agrees with Wilson that political activity is limited to the bureaucracy, with no outside force capable of establishing the parameters of bureaucratic prerogative and action. One of the reasons for this was that while differentiation within the bureaucracy had been rapid, development outside had been much slower. Hence, there was no extra-bureaucratic force capable of overseeing the political elite, so it dominated political activity (Riggs 1966: 131, 197, 319). Further, because the political elite was well developed and politically predominant, opportunities for status and wealth were seen to be correlated with high bureaucratic position rather than with business and entrepreneurship.

While Riggs established a tight and complete theoretical model, it is apparent that most analysts have relied more on his description of politics than his theory. The use of ‘bureaucratic polity’ conjures an image of a powerful and unshakeable bureaucracy, and a politically involved and dominant military. Whenever there was a coup and each time parliamentary rule failed, this was confirmation of the existence of the bureaucratic polity.

That Wilson and Riggs are Western analysts has not prevented their work being adopted by Thailand’s political and social analysts. As noted by Neher and Bidhya (1984: 1), Western scholars dominated the study of politics until the early 1980s. Even with an expansion of Thai academic studies, they argue, Western frameworks have remained predominant. Additionally, many Thai political scientists were trained in the North American tradition (see, for example, Thapapun 1975; Kanok 1984; Pison 1988). For many of these scholars, while consensus and order have been important elements of their analysis, there has also been a concern for reform. Because of the influence of the bureaucratic polity model, much of the emphasis in studies has been on administrative reform, the need for the development of extra-bureaucratic forces, and overcoming clientelist politics (Neher and Bidhya 1984: 6–7).

Challenging the consensus on the bureaucratic polity

While there has been a tradition of radical scholarship (see Reynolds and Hong 1983), anti-communism and the resultant political repression from the 1950s meant that it was not until the 1973–76 democratic interregnum that there was a renewed academic interest in radical approaches to political studies (see Morell and Chai-Anan 1981: part II). While the political openness of the period was short-lived and repression strong, academic interest in radical approaches continued into the 1980s.

With notable exceptions, the critics of modernisation approaches have seldom provided a theoretical critique of the perspective. Some of the problems associated with the approach can be summarised here (for more details, see Hewison 1989: 10–14).

A brief critique of modernisation approaches

One of the substantive criticisms of the modernisation approaches is that they prevent a full analysis of conflict, change and class struggle (Phillips 1979: 438; Girling 1981b: 10). The organic model of society developed by those influenced by modernisation theory stresses equilibrium within society and emphasises the delineation of structures which maintain the system. A further telling criticism has been that the approach tends to be neo-evolutionary. In particular, Riggs’s work presents a neo-evolutionary typology of structural features of social and political development. There
is an assumption that a universal path from traditional to industrial or modern society exists, with development being measured at points along this path.

There is also a tendency for this approach to produce arguments which rely on cultural determinism for their explanations. There is a heavy emphasis on Buddhism as an explanatory factor for social and political action. Such explanations – essentially impossible to test – suggest that culture exists independently of people in society. This is a false assumption for, as Moore (1969: 486) has argued, ‘Cultural values do not descend from heaven to influence the course of history’. In fact, the reverse is true: cultural values are not unchanging and are themselves influenced by the course of history. To explain social or political action by simple recourse to assumed cultural values obscures the significance of the way such values change and the broader political and economic changes taking place in society.

A final significant challenge to the modernisation perspective relates to the instrumentalist position it takes on relations between state and society. Writers in this school generally consider that there should be extra-bureaucratic influences on the state, and see such influences in essentially instrumental terms – where interest groups gain control of policy-making – thereby giving limited attention to structural factors. The lack of such influences in Thailand is usually explained in cultural terms.

**Beyond the bureaucratic polity**

Interestingly, these criticisms have not necessarily been the factors which have led to a move away from the models. Indeed, many of those adopting alternative theoretical approaches have tended to accept the description of the bureaucratic polity. It has been the perception that this model is no longer an adequate description of politics in the 1990s that has led to a move to go beyond the bureaucratic polity (see, for example, Anek 1992: 4). There are essentially two paths which seek to move beyond the bureaucratic polity – first, the neo-pluralist and institutionalist approaches; and second, the political economy approach. These will be briefly discussed. A third path, represented by postmodernist approaches, is not discussed here as it has not yet established a significant body of literature (see Callahan 1993; 1994).

(i) Neo-pluralist and institutionalist approaches

Neo-pluralist approaches are well represented in the recent literature on Thailand’s politics, while institutionalist approaches are only beginning to be applied. Common features, drawing together what is a diverse range of analysts, include a focus on an expanding range of interest groups and a recognition that the bureaucratic polity was an adequate representation of the situation until the early 1970s (e.g., Anek 1992; Christensen 1993; Christensen and Ammar 1993; Doner and Ramsey 1993; King and LoGerfo 1996). While it is clear that this group owes much to the modernisation approach, they are seen to represent an important path away from the bureaucratic polity model.

Prolific author and commentator Anek Loathamatas (1992), has produced a comprehensive approach to the ways in which a neo-pluralist – he uses the term ‘corporatist’ – model may be utilised to go beyond the bureaucratic polity. While not confronting the theoretical shortcomings associated with Riggs’s model, Anek does provide a theoretically informed model of ‘liberal corporatism’ applied to Thailand (see Anek 1992: Chapter 7). While declaring his work a discussion of ‘political economy’, it has much in common with revised pluralist approaches (see Martin 1983). He argues that the bureaucratic polity has been replaced by a system of liberal corporatism which is ‘marked by a high degree of autonomy and spontaneity, and by the central role of private groups in the creation and operation of their representative associations, as well as systems of government-group interest mediation’ (Anek 1992: 13–14). Anek contends that extra-bureaucratic influences, and especially organised business, now have greatly enhanced power over the state, even if in a ‘less statist’ manner than in South Korea and Taiwan (ibid.: 15). Such influence was not possible under the bureaucratic polity.

In essence, the approach is that bureaucracy and business have developed a new relationship – no longer is business dominated by bureaucracy; rather, the former is privileged (ibid.: 150). The outcome from this is that analysts must examine the organised interests and their relationship to the state and policy-making not that far from early pluralist models, but modified by a more critical approach to power.

Institutionalist analysts produce similar observations but from a different theoretical position, with one of their central questions being, in the words of Haggard and Kaufman (1994: 6), ‘How can economic decision making become less discretionary and more institutionalized?’ Christensen (1993: 1), writing on Thailand, moves the theoretical focus beyond business groups, observing that, since the decline of the bureaucratic polity, the political system has developed ‘channels of influence’ for a range of interest groups. He refers to urban bankers, industrialists, organised business, provincial elites and the rural majority as interest groups (ibid.: 1, 9, 11). Christensen and Ammar (1993: 1) argue that these are ‘single-issue interest groups lobbying for their own particular benefit’. This approach essentially reduces politics to a ‘districtive game’, where some interest groups gain support or subsidies at the expense of the majority. Such a situation emerges because ‘independent participatory institutions . . . have remained fragmented and local’ (Christensen 1993: 19), and because policy institutions are inefficient and representative political organisations are poorly developed (ibid.: 1).
For those adopting this position, the resolution to the problem is to be found in the market, which must be made more effective. This would be achieved with the development of efficient state institutional and regulatory frameworks which allow for the operation of the market while guaranteeing state resources. For this to develop requires the creation and strengthening of coalitions which share authority between state actors and those in the private sector. In other words, policy-making achieves best outcomes when it is not captured by any particular interest (see Hawes and Hong 1993: 633, 648–9). Thus, the development of institutional capacity and cooperative strategies is seen as crucial to a functioning political system. For these theorists, this involves a search for the impediments both to reform and to the efficient operation of the market within those elements of state and society central to policy-making.

In this arena, analysts identify systemic problems with both democratic and state institutions in Thailand (Christensen and Ammar 1993: 1). The theoretical conclusion is that good public policy is developed by governments that are relatively insulated from sectional political influence. When Thailand had an elected government, it is noted that the legislature has been relatively unproductive 'in making laws, especially when members of parliament are elected'. Hence, the military coup is seen to 'perform an important function'. The junta 'assumes broad legislative powers, and . . . break[s] the legislative logjam developed in previous elected parliaments' (Christensen et al. 1993: 19–20). Parliaments and governments are seen to have been dominated by patronage and rent-seeking, and it has been private-sector dynamism alone which has overcome such weaknesses (ibid.: 1–8). Doner (1992: 193), writing from a similar theoretical location, draws comparable conclusions, arguing that while officials have not been isolated from 'private influence', they have had the 'space' necessary for 'greater consistency and less politicisation' in policy-making.

This observation that the electoral system and its institutions are flawed is common to a range of writers. Even those who are not so theoretically driven suggest that there is an urgent need for the reform of institutions such as political parties, electoral laws and the constitution (King and LoGerfo 1996). The chapters in this collection by McCargo and by Surin and McCargo certainly make this case strongly. However, their focus is more on effective representation than on the development of policy. For institutionalists, political parties are not necessarily central, and thus their influence and significance is often discounted (Hawes and Hong 1993: 649).

While institutionalists place considerable attention on interest groups – in large measure, the sum of civil society in this approach – they tend to privilege formal structures. Neo-pluralists, while somewhat broader in approach, also focus on the formal level of political activity. Interest groups are seen to have emerged only since the 1970s (Chai-Anan 1989: 313–14). Both approaches tend to view the role of interest groups as sectional, issue-based and even selfish. Neo-pluralists tend to argue that interest groups provide important inputs to the political system and therefore need to be developed within appropriate political frameworks. Institutionalists, on the other hand, note that interest groups in Thailand are not conducive to the development of good policy, as participatory institutions are identified as localised and fragmented (Christensen 1993: 19; Christensen and Ammar 1993: 1, 55). While there is encouragement for the expansion of civil society, this is not seen to be sufficient for the further evolution of the political system – the expansion of informal political opposition and the development of civil society tend to be viewed in problematic terms. For them, the crucial factor is the construction of 'growth coalitions' between (mainly elite) societal interest groups and the state.

Such approaches offer scope for further research, and their influence can be seen in a number of recent attempts to re-examine the relationship between business and the state, and in Parichart Chotiya’s Chapter 15 in this collection, where she explains the problems faced by provincial business in dealing with central government.

(ii) Political economy approaches

The view that extra-bureaucratic influences have become increasingly significant also informs recent political economy approaches. However, their initial emphasis tends to be on societal or class influences on the state rather than on the identification of interest groups. While there has been a long retreat from a reliance on crude, Marxist-derived, instrumentalist and reductionist approaches (see Poulantzas 1969; Miliband 1978, 1983), political economists argue that class relations are significant in determining the nature of domination – the distribution and use of power – in contemporary society. The nature of domination is seen to be structured by these relations and by the relationship between elements in economy, society and state.

In examining political activity, although political economists have been vitally interested in policy and policy-making (see, for example, Hewison 1989: part II), they do not view policy as neutral or as representing the outcome of a process of professional decision-making based on an analysis of available interest group inputs. Policy is, quite simply, a reflection of the nature of domination in society. In terms of policy, the issue is not to identify 'good' and 'bad' policy choices, but which policy agendas emerge and hold sway under particular political regimes. Indeed, it might be suggested that the emphasis on 'fixing' institutions in the neo-pluralist and, especially, the institutionalist approaches, while it is a factor to be considered, misses important issues of political activity. Thus, some of the important questions and issues which political economists address include the nature of domination, the growth of political opposition, the character of the state and regime, and the development of civil society. It was the expansion of civil society and oppositions which was one of the initial organising themes for this collection. Notions of opposition and civil society are
closely related, as oppositions must be conceptualised in terms of the political space in which they operate. Political economists have been particularly concerned to understand political conflict, activism and opposition. Recently, there has been a particular focus on non-formal political institutions.

While each of the authors in this collection will conceptualise civil society in different ways, they would probably agree that it is an autonomous sphere of political space in which ‘political forces representing constellations of interests in society have contested state power’ (Bernhard 1993: 307). This space of civil society can be seen to have ebbed and flowed in Thailand throughout this century (see the next section) and has existed, albeit in very limited forms, under highly authoritarian regimes. In the struggle for the expansion of political space, the activities of oppositions are central, for it is these groups who challenge and deal with the regime. Political oppositions are, by their nature, multifaceted, and will often include organised interest groups, political parties and parliaments, but also activist groups and movements such as trade unions, employer and professional associations, women’s groups, student organisations, peasant and ethnic coalitions and associations, an expansive group of NGOs and a range of social movements. However, these oppositions are not conceptualised in simplistic terms when their impact on democratisation is considered. Oppositions will inevitably reproduce class inequalities of the society in which they operate, and they will not be necessarily democratic or participatory in their organisation or practice (see Wood 1991).

Political opposition is seen as important for the expansion and consolidation of political space, but its relationship to regime and government does not always require the institutions of parliamentary representation. Political space is a site of struggle as well as negotiation and agreement; it is an arena of contestation. However, this contestation is not always a challenge to the state, especially where an expanded political space is considered a legitimate part of political activity.

This perspective on the development of civil society as critical to the extension of democratisation is distinguished from the neo-pluralist approaches by its emphasis on society. While neo-pluralists and institutionalists emphasise formal institutions and organised interest groups, political economists tend to adopt a wider perspective, stressing the significance of extended political space for a range of groups and classes, and the history of the emergence and constitution of these groups and civil society.

Because not all of the authors in this collection have had the opportunity to include an extended historical perspective on civil society into their chapters, it is appropriate to briefly review Thailand’s modern history from this position. There are two reasons for this. First, to emphasise the ebb and flow of political space, so that the significant political activism evident throughout much of the period of military authoritarianism is not obscured. Second, such a chronology provides a necessary backdrop for the chapters which follow.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE EBB AND FLOW OF POLITICAL SPACE

Many studies identify 1932 and the overthrow of the absolute monarchy as the beginning of the modern period of Thailand’s politics. Others, following the dynastic approach to periodisation, might nominate one or more points during the fourth to sixth reigns of the Chakri period (1851–1925) as marking this point. For example, the 1855 Bowring Treaty, the freeing of Thais from slavery and bondage, or Thailand’s participation in the First World War. These, and similar events, all warrant attention. However, the focus on major events and dynastic histories does not necessarily provide a picture of the wider spectrum of change which has taken place in society. This is especially true when political activism is considered. Indeed, as noted above, there has been a view that activism has not been an aspect of Thailand’s political culture until recent years. The following overview offers a reassessment of that perspective, drawing on the political economy approach outlined above.

The discussion here begins in the 1920s, as recent research has indicated that there was a significant expansion of political space at this time (Lockhart 1990; Nakharin 1992; Copeland 1993). With a vigorous press and considerable debate concerning the nature of politics and the constitution of society, there was considerable criticism of the monarchy and its absolutism. This period of expanded political space extended from about 1918 and continued until the change of regime in 1932, despite attempts by the government of the last of the absolute monarchs, King Prajadhipok, to close the space.

Political activism expanded considerably immediately after the overthrow of the monarchy by the People’s Party, led by Pridi Phanomyong. This group initially received considerable support from workers, students and other urban groups. The years 1932 and 1933 were most significant, and saw much debate and political manoeuvring, especially as conflicts between radical and conservative elements within the new government developed. These arguments concerned issues such as economic policy and political representation. Interestingly, debates in the first-ever National Assembly were especially vigorous, reflecting the broadening of political space. However, the monarchists were not finished, and in 1933 there was an armed royalist rebellion, which the government was able to defeat only after heavy fighting. Significantly, the constitutional regime received strong public support.

The combined impact of the 1932 overthrow of the monarchy, the 1933 defeat of the royalist rebellion and the founding of a parliament and constitution represented the establishment of a new government, a new regime and the embedding of a new state. Not only was the absolutist
political regime and its highly personalised government – dominated by royal relatives and the nobility – thrown out, but the development of a new social, ideological, economic and political logic of power, best described as capitalist, was enhanced.

Ironically, it was the restorationist rebellion and the ongoing conflict between royalists and anti-royalists over the next decade that led to a considerable narrowing of political space and an increased political profile for the military, as the People's Party struggled to entrench its constitutional regime. Despite this narrowing of political space, debate continued within the National Assembly, but by 1938 the military was firmly in control. Some, including army leader and prime minister Phibun Songkhram, were attracted by the examples of fascist regimes in Germany and Italy, and by the expansion of Japan's militarism. Fascist thought had been attractive for some time and this increased (Thompson 1967: 216–7; Barmé 1993: 78, 87), and the government began to introduce policies which smacked of increasing authoritarianism.

This continued until the end of the Second World War when, with the military in decline, Pridi and his supporters reasserted civilian rule. Again, political space was expanded as civilian politicians re-established themselves. For the first time political opposition began to be expressed through competing political parties, with royalists dominating the Progressives and Democrats, opposed to a coalition around Pridi. In opposing the military, Pridi found it necessary to make concessions to the royalists. However, they had not forgotten his leadership of the 1932 coup or the insults the People's Party dealt the monarchy at that time. They used the political space created by Pridi's government to mount a campaign against him, and were prepared to deal with the military. When the young King Ananda Mahidol died in mysterious circumstances in mid-1946, a situation was created which allowed the military to mount a coup and again to restrict political space.

The period following the 1947 coup is usually portrayed as one of military dominance (see Girling 1981a: 108–11). This is true to a degree, as the period was marked by considerable manoeuvring between various military and police leaders. However, this competition also permitted the maintenance of a limited political space, as no one group established its supremacy. In addition, parliament continued to operate and, although opposition was tame compared to earlier years, managed to articulate concerns about government policy. The press, business organisations and unions were also able to provide some opposition. However, it was in 1955 that political opposition was again able to flower. In an effort to regain the political initiative from his rivals, Prime Minister Phibun embarked on a democracy campaign which was to lead to an election in 1957. Thais appreciated the expansion of democratic space, and vigorous debates developed in the local press and at Bangkok's own Hyde Park, Sanam Luang. As the election campaign continued, it appears that Police Chief Phao Sriyanond was not prepared to take any chances on the result, and the government party won. However, there was considerable public dissatisfaction and even demonstrations against the election result.

The instability permitted General Sarit Thanarat to stage a coup which altered the face of modern politics. Sarit abolished parliament and the constitution, outlawed political parties and unions, and founded a 'Revolutionary Party' and a highly authoritarian regime. Sarit's dictatorship was vigorous in repressing all opposition and, in addition to exiling political opponents, introduced summary executions of alleged communists, arsonists and others identified as opponents, while making economic development, rather than politics, the key to his rule.

Sarit also began a process which left an indelible mark on modern politics – the rehabilitation of the monarchy. While the institution had remained symbolic after 1932, the various governments had done much to raise the profile of non-royal elements of state ideology. Sarit, who declared that political activism would not be tolerated and the trappings of parliament and constitution were not to be quickly reintroduced, offered an alternative in the monarchy. Sarit used the inexperienced King to raise the regime's profile by resurrecting the monarchy as a traditional political institution which embodied a paternalistic notion of representation (see Thak 1979: 309–24). Effectively, Sarit's coup abolished the constitutional regime, replacing it with an authoritarian regime. But it did more: the regime moulded a state which incorporated capitalist developmentism and authoritarianism with a technocratic logic to the organisation and operation of the state apparatus. The significance of this cannot be underestimated.

When Sarit died in 1963, his deputies, General Thanom Kittikachorn and General Prapas Charusathiarana, continued his authoritarian rule for another decade. The 1960s saw the consolidation of anti-communism as the rationale for the maintenance of repressive policies. The spectre of communism was used to tarnish virtually all opponents, including those who called for a constitution and parliamentary forms. This was reinforced internationally by the Cold War, and especially by US intervention in Indochina and its use of bases in Thailand.

As the US's commitment to the region and Thailand declined, the military's control of the political sphere began to show some cracks, and a widened political space began to be created. There were demands for a more independent foreign policy and pressure for the promulgation of a constitution increased. After a decade of 'drafting', one was finally produced in 1968. However, the elections which followed, the first since 1957, were again marred by accusations of rigging, tarnishing the government's reputation. Thereafter followed a series of allegations of corruption in high places and campaigns for increased political representation. The military attempted to once again close political space by getting rid of a fractious parliament through a coup in 1971. But this was unsuccessful, as
much of the increased political activism was outside parliament and increasingly involved students and academics, who led the campaign against the government and its regime. Increased repression failed, and in October 1973 a student-led rebellion brought hundreds of thousands onto Bangkok’s streets; the regime Sarit had established was doomed.

The 1973–76 period of civilian rule was one of great political conflict and competition as rival political groups, interests and movements jockeyed to establish positions in a political environment where the military was clearly in disarray and unable to mould political developments. The political space created was as wide as it has ever been in Thailand (see Girling 1981a; Morell and Chai-Anan 1981). Part of the reason for this was that no government could fully establish itself, especially as the constitutional and parliamentary regime was not, and could not be, entrenched. The conflicts which developed became violent as competition between right and left intensified. This overtook the ability of government to control the extensive political space which had been established. In part, the failure of government to establish such control was due to the instability of the parliamentary regime which meant ‘revolving door’ government and uncontrolled and unbounded political space, and which led to the military coup of October 1976. This meant a reassertion of authoritarianism and anti-communism, albeit through a civilian government, which lasted a year.

From late 1977 to 1988 there was an evolution of a constitutional and parliamentary regime under various governments led by former military leaders. The period witnessed a deliberate attempt by the governments of General Kriangsak Chomanan and General Prem Tinsulanonda to loosen the authoritarianism of the 1976–77 period. This included an expansion of the role of parliament and political parties. Part of the reason for this expansion of political space was that the authoritarianism of the previous government had proven divisive, driving political opposition into the arms of the underground Communist Party which was mounting an increasingly effective guerrilla war. The electoral outcome in 1989 was the formation of the elected coalition government led by Chatichai Choonhavan, discussed above. Behind this there had been a development and consolidation of party politics. However, it soon became clear that the polity established under Prem was one which appealed to conservatives, as decision-making and policy were not entrusted to popularly elected politicians. These important tasks remained with an elite of civil and military bureaucrats and technocrats. Chatichai’s civilian government rigorously challenged this conservative state.

Chatichai’s government presided over mammoth economic growth, but could not withstand a conservative backlash. The military threw the government out in the 1991 coup which targeted parliament, a civilian- and MP-dominated cabinet, and associated political space. The state, existing behind the government and regime, and its basic elements, were not threatened by the military – bureaucratism and technocratism, law, and the national symbols of Nation, Religion and Monarchy were not challenged.

It may seem odd that Chatichai’s government and its parliamentary regime was seen as challenging the state. After all, it appeared to embody the capitalist development process, its values and methods, which had been set in train by Sarit. While the coup did not attack capitalists or capitalist values, it was evident to conservative groups that the parliamentary regime was not simply developing capitalism as an economic system, but was fostering societal forces which were moving the state towards a new logic whereby the capitalist state could include notions of political participation. The conservatives wanted – and installed – a government which was meant to keep the lid on these new social forces (FEER 21 March 1991). As noted above, there were amazing scenes as huge numbers opposed the military’s constitutional plans.

This outline brings the chronology up to the period where the chapters in this collection begin their interpretations. Clearly, the above discussion indicates that the emergence of political space is not a recent phenomenon. The ebb and flow of this space has been the result of political struggles and the actions and reactions of governments.

Before concluding this introduction, I provide a brief discussion of the chapters comprising this collection.

THE CHAPTERS

As noted above, there are differences in theoretical approach between the authors of the chapters. However, all agree that the basic form of politics is undergoing continuing and rapid change in Thailand. The collection attempts to chart some of these changes by focusing on the important actors, groups and classes involved.

In Chapter 2, Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker provide an analysis of the dramatic political transition taking place in Thailand. They argue that political power is the subject of contest between a number of socioeconomic forces, some from the old political and economic elite and others being relatively new forces, and map the contest for power in the 1990s. In explaining the significance of Thailand’s capitalist revolution for political and economic power, Pasuk and Baker give attention to six predominant forces at work: mandarins, metropolitan business and technocrats, provincial business, peasants, salariat, and urban workers. For each of these forces they trace the social bases of their support, their emergence, the ideas or interests which draw them together, and the institutional forms they assume. An important theme they note is the division which appears to have emerged between rural and urban people. The contests described in this chapter are at once fascinating and an important background for the following chapter, and critical for the future of Thailand’s political economy and the course of democratisation.
Chapter 3, by Chai-Anan Samudavanija, illustrates well the changes taking place. Arguing that Thailand's economy and society have long been 'open', he notes, however, that the civil and military bureaucracies have been and remain closed. The state has been centralised and activist, and the military and bureaucracy, the groups that have wielded political power, continue to block efforts to expand participation and decentralise power. Chai-Anan argues, however, that this is a futile exercise on their part, for the supporters of the conservative state are being bypassed by the social forces thrown up by globalisation. His analysis of the ethnic dimension of capital and economic power and its role in political development is an important contribution; it is an aspect of political history which has not received the attention it has deserved in recent studies.

In Chapter 4, Kevin Hewison examines the monarchy, another important element in the conservative polity. He argues that while the monarchy is constitutional, the institution has been developed in a manner which allows it to regularly intervene in the political process, making the present King an 'activist monarch'. Hewison points out that this is not the usual view of the monarchy, but that part of the definition of a conservative polity has been the re-creation of a powerful — politically and symbolically — monarchy. A conservative polity would preserve and extend the power of the monarchy. He suggests that the conservatism of the present King, who has been on the throne for a remarkable 50 years, has been important in defining the role of the monarchy and the direction of political development. Hewison goes on to suggest that the problem for the institution is that its preferred polity is increasingly challenged by the emergence of civil society. Parliament, popular elections and constitutions have the potential to move power closer to the populace and away from the conservative ideals embodied in unrepresentative institutions like the military and bureaucracy.

In defining the Thai nation and the conservative polity, the monarchy has been a central element. Closely related to it is Buddhism, defined as the state religion and a pillar of national ideology. However, in Chapter 5, Peter Jackson argues that the centralised hierarchy of Buddhism and the state-defined and controlled monkhood is increasingly irrelevant. He shows that the 1990s have seen the rise of a diverse range of movements and cults at the periphery of the state-controlled monkhood and a shift in the pattern of relations between the religion and secular political authorities. Jackson argues that rapid socio-economic change has meant that official forms of Buddhism are less significant for the state and contemporary urban dwellers. The state's loosened grip and the declining authority of the monkhood have fostered new religious trends — from reformist rationalism to supernaturalism and syncretic rationalist animism. Jackson suggests that this does not mean declining religiosity, as there is clearly a heightened interest in new religious movements growing at the margins of state control. Buddhism is now serving a wide and conflicting spectrum of political interests. However, while the role of Buddhism is hotly contested, there remains a pervasive concern to ensure that it remains an integral component of the ideology and practice of power.

In each of the first four chapters there is agreement that the remarkable socio-economic transformations which have taken place have had a significant impact on politics and democratisation. In Chapter 6, while Paul Handley concurs that this has been the case, he challenges the more optimistic assessments which have argued that a new business class has given rise to a new relationship between business and government. He suggests that in seeking and exerting power, the 'new' elite is little different from the 'old' elite. While differing from its predecessors by origin, the new elite has displayed a primary concern for the economic benefits of power and for using these benefits to enhance their power. In demonstrating this, Handley provides fascinating information regarding the centrality of fortune hunting on the Securities Exchange of Thailand — its fluctuations and centrality to political and policy decision-making. He supports his analysis with case studies of the fate of state enterprise privatisations.

In Chapter 7, Duncan McCargo examines the role of political parties in the contemporary polity. There are relatively few studies of Thailand's political parties, perhaps because analysts have not felt them significant. When studied, most authors have suggested that parties are either opportunistic or display few of the qualities expected of a professional political party. McCargo takes issue with these positions, arguing that the search for 'authentic' or 'real' parties is misplaced. He argues that Thailand's parties should be viewed as organisations in a constant state of change, neither real nor authentic, but actual, seeking power in complex political situations. Rather than seeking an ideal party, McCargo suggests that the study of actual parties is likely to be revealing, and he provides case studies of three — the Democrats, Palang Dharma and New Aspiration — which are used to illustrate the tensions and conflicts parties face. The significance of political parties in the 1990s has certainly been advanced as the electoral system has been developed.

Electoral politics and the electoral system is the focus of Chapter 8, by Surin Mairsirikrod and McCargo. Commenting on the results of the November 1996 election, The Economist (23 November 1996) pointed out that 'Elections... often produce the best government money can buy, rather than a good one'. Surin and McCargo note that there have been major political changes since the mid-1970s, with elections gaining increased significance as mechanisms for managing political change. However, they observe that the mass of the population remains excluded from meaningful political participation through a number of pernicious influences, including money politics, as identified by The Economist, amounting to a corruption of the electoral system. They suggest that a far wider political space must be created to make the political system more inclusive. That some elected politicians regard extra-parliamentary political activity
as illegitimate is a cause for concern. Utilising categories similar to those developed in Chapter 2, Surin and McCargo conclude that electoral politics is likely to be more significant and meaningful if it is viewed as part of a wider political process which is inclusive rather than exclusionary.

Part of the reason for the exclusionary nature of Thailand’s political process and the divide that has emerged between urban and rural voters is the continued dominance of ‘old’ forces in rural areas. In Chapter 9, Bruce Missingham studies two Northeastern schools — representing the central government at the local level — and their relationships with the community. He highlights some of the contradictions and conflicts in the state’s approach to local participation through village schools as agencies of development. He shows that while participation has become a part of government rhetoric, teachers’ relationships with villages and their approach to community development is shaped by bureaucratic practices and discourses which assign status and power to officials and devalue local culture and participation. Schools, like many parts of the bureaucracy, remain oriented to hierarchy, authority and centralised control. The state, in fact, attempts to retain control, and villagers remain excluded. While people in Bangkok may feel ‘free’ of these controls, rural people remain dominated, and this has an impact in many areas, including the electoral system.

In Chapter 10, Andrew Brown examines one of the most consistent of opposition groups, organised labour, and its political role. He begins by noting that the emphasis on the role of the middle classes in the May 1992 events has devalued the role that the working class has played. He suggests that this is one further example of a tendency to look for particular working-class activism and ignore the realities of its oppositional role. Brown suggests an alternative theoretical perspective on labour, and follows this with a brief analysis of the history of the role of the working class in expanding political space. In examining the recent history of working-class struggle, he notes that the state and capital has long co-operated to disorganise labour in an effort to prevent it developing into a significant political influence. Brown argues that labour relations have been a microcosm of wider struggles over participation, opposition to authoritarian rule and the development of representative forms of politics. The further development of capitalism is likely to see this continue as the working class expands.

If the working class has historically been a pillar of opposition to authoritarianism, environmentalism appears as a relatively recent phenomenon which has challenged the state and its officials. In Chapter 11, Philip Hirsch observes that while environmentalism has drawn in a wide range of social, economic and political actors, it has challenged the dominant patterns of development and vested interests. Environmentalism is an oppositional force, but one that has been inclusive. For Hirsch, environmentalism signifies a change in the way in which politics is carried out in Thailand, allowing coalitions of interests to assemble to challenge centralised and elite decision-making. The chapter argues that environmentalism indicates the growing role of the middle class as a political force, but also that the participation of peripheral interests may be enhanced, albeit on highly unequal terms. Environmentalism is not simply an inevitable outcome of middle-class expansion, but a complex political force.

Hirsch’s analysis of environmentalism is followed by a study of the development of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and especially those involved with environmental issues. In Chapter 12, Prudhisan Jumbala and Maneerat Mitprasat chart the rise of NGOs as an element of opposition to the authoritarianism of the centralised state and its bureaucracy. Following this, they examine two cases of NGO activism involving local environmental issues and the exercise of political and economic power. In both cases, villagers faced attacks on their livelihoods and ways of life, and were prepared to take defensive action with the assistance of NGOs. The support of NGOs was crucial in technical areas and in providing knowledge of the political system. The resulting alliances have been significant in steering villagers to institutional procedures, suggesting that NGOs are integrating villagers into the political system. Even so, NGOs remain critical of the existing system, desiring reforms to permit enhanced people’s participation. The development of local organisations suggests a potential for the expansion of civil society in provincial areas.

Like many of the contributors, Prudhisan and Maneerat suggest the significance of having a national platform for political action. Important in this is the role of the media. In Chapter 13, Thitinan Pongsudhirak examines the political role of the media, with particular emphasis on the print media. Since the events of May 1992, the media’s role has been dynamic and significant, making it worthy of attention in any analysis of Thailand’s politics and the emergence of civil society. Thitinan traces the transformation of the media’s role from being essentially a servant of the state to its present position as a political watchdog. Part of this transformation has been due to continuing economic change and technology, but it also reflects on expanded political space. That the press can take on an oppositional role augurs well for enhanced participation and democratisation. However, it is noted that media influence will not automatically support democratic development. Because of shifting business interests, large media companies may come to act in their own corporate interests rather than continuing their oppositional role.

A unique feature of political activism in Thailand has been the high-profile role played by members of the medical profession. In the development of NGOs after 1976, in the activism of the difficult 1991–92 period, and in organisations monitoring recent elections, medical professionals have been especially conspicuous. In Chapter 14, Scott Bamber examines the forces which brought the medical profession into political activism in the 1970s, the factors which enabled the medical profession to avoid
severe repercussions resulting from their political involvement, and the link between this involvement and the political activism of the early 1990s. The picture produced is suitably complex, but suggests that the high-profile role of these dedicated reformers is unlikely to be reduced in the near future.

In the final chapter, Parichart Chotiya presents a case study of the role of provincial business in political development. While business is often considered to be one of the pivotal forces in the process of democratisation, it is clear from this chapter that business cannot be considered an homogeneous group which can clearly articulate a political or policy position. Parichart indicates considerable tension between provincial business and the state, as well as with big Bangkok business. She shows that even the development of representative business associations at the provincial level has not been able to ease these tensions. In addition, opportunism is not an unknown political quality among business people. Again, the complexity of the democratisation process is demonstrated.

_Political Change in Thailand: Democracy and Participation_ offers an analysis of the current state of Thailand’s politics. The military coup has long been the usual way to change governments, and authoritarian rule has been the norm. But this appears to be changing as democratisation takes hold. Since the bloody days of May 1992, Thais have gone to the polls to install governments with elected prime ministers on three occasions. It would appear that Thailand’s politics is undergoing a fundamental transformation. This collection assesses this transformation. Recognising that social and political power is being defined more broadly, the chapters examine the challenges to the conservative state. While most of the contributors are optimistic about the continuing process of democratisation and the development of civil society, none are blind to the obstacles which thwart and undermine participation. The role of oppositions, both within parliament and defined more broadly, are clearly central to the development of political systems which no longer exclude the majority of the population.

2 Power in transition

Thailand in the 1990s

_Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker*

Thailand is in a state of dramatic transition. Political power is being contested by a variety of socio-political forces, both old and new. This chapter sketches a map of this contest in the mid-1990s.

Thailand is moving from a pre-modern order to a society dominated by urban capitalism. Such transitions have been the focus of political economy analysis for the last two centuries. In broad outline, Thailand’s transition follows the historical pattern – the growth of industrial capitalism, the transformation of work, and a new and unstable relationship between people and the environment. But several factors make the Thai case different from the classical political economy picture developed from Ricardo to Marx. Both the starting and ending points are different, and the pace is faster.

Thailand’s pre-modern order differed from the feudal systems of Europe. In brief, the ruling class consisted not of landlords but mandarins – families – who drew their income and power from service to the royal state.

This new urban capitalism is different from the classical version of mid-nineteenth century Europe. First, the dominant figures of the new political economy are not individual capitalist entrepreneurs, but large and complex multinational companies and local firms which operate in the milieu such companies have created. Second, the new urban work-force is very different from the European proletariat, with the skilled and educated portion being more significant, while the blue-collar section has been repressed. Third, the pace of development of Thailand’s capitalism is faster, with many developments which occurred as stages in the history of European capitalism occurring almost simultaneously.

The result is an old society of mandarin and peasant being overlaid by a new society of capital and labour. But, as in other transitions, the result is not a straightforward victory for the new ‘superior’ social order. The old order fights for survival. Parts of the old ruling class adapt to new circumstances, seeking alliances which bridge the gulf between old and new. As a result, industrial societies carry remnants of the old order they supersede, and Thailand is no exception. These processes of adaptation and alliance lend complexity to the current map of political conflict.