

# Weber, Marx and Contemporary Thailand

Kevin Hewison

## Abstract

*Thailand's on-going political crisis began with agitation against the Thaksin Shinawatra-led government, saw a military coup and a spate of street-based protest and violence. Drawing on Marx and Weber and using the categories of class, status and party, it is argued that Thailand has reached a political turning point. Subaltern challenges to the hierarchical institutions of military, monarchy and bureaucracy appear to have resulted in political patterns of the past being set on a new trajectory. The social forces that congregate around old ideas associated with status honour – hierarchy, social closure and inequality, 'Thai-style democracy' and privilege – are challenged by those championing equality, access, voting and populism. While the balance of forces would suggest that an historical turning point has been achieved, reaction and unexpected outcomes remain possible.*

**KEYWORDS:** class, status, party, monarchy, historical turning point, hierarchy

## INTRODUCTION

FOR SEVERAL YEARS, THE popular media has proclaimed Thailand to be in a state of political crisis. Meanwhile, Thai political leaders have repeatedly affirmed that despite protests, a military coup in 2006, five prime ministers since then, sometimes violent colour-coded street protests, and remarkable judicial activism, politics is getting back to 'normal'. In this context, 'normal' apparently means the kind of 'political stability' claimed to have existed for much of the post-World War Two period, and refers to political configurations that have been called "Thai-style democracy" (see Hewison and Kengkij 2010). Essentially, this is a system where average people, politicians, parties and parliament are kept weak and where real power resides with traditional, repressive, and hierarchical institutions: the monarchy, military, and the bureaucracy. While the supposed stability is little more than a functionalist myth, it is these hierarchical institutions that have been celebrated in academic accounts over several decades (see Darling 1968; Kuhonta 2009; Neher 1975; Warr and Bhanupong 1996).

Getting back to 'normal' would thus mean a powerful and politicized military and a parliament that is a weak institution characterized by shifting loyalties. In these circumstances, major parties build tenuous and expensive coalition

governments and small parties negotiate cabinet seats and position themselves for expensive elections and the horse-trading that follows them. This arrangement has been called ‘money politics’ or, more recently, the ‘patronage system’. Money politics, by limiting the power of parliament, means that real political power continues to reside in a conservative elite drawn from the hierarchical extra-parliamentary institutions. If political parties are important only as a window-dressing for the power that resides elsewhere, then the citizen matters only as a voter and, between elections, only as a source of potential instability that must be controlled through the policing of loyalty. Censorship, repression, state violence and repeated demands for ideological conformity are backed by a façade of limited democracy and the state’s laws and guns.

Re-establishing this ‘normality’ amounts to a reassertion of the political power of the conservative elite. Yet this claim to the right to rule is not unchallenged. The argument of this paper is that the challenge to conservative power was unleashed in its present iteration with the economic recession in 1997 that altered the structure of economic power and the institutions and the patterns of politics.<sup>1</sup> The struggle between the old ruling class and the proponents of change has reached a stage where a turning point in Thai politics has been reached.

Conceptualizing political crisis and momentous change while it is in process, and with many sites of conflict, is no simple matter. One of the most significant recent approaches to understanding change derives from the masterful work of Collier and Collier (1991: 29). They recognise social and political antecedents leading to cleavages or crises that, in turn, result in change that takes place in distinct ways; this in the context of what Collier and Collier call “critical junctures”. Explaining this historical institutionalist approach, Capoccia and Keleman (2007: 341) argue that it assumes “a dual model of institutional development characterized by relatively long periods of path-dependent *institutional stability* and reproduction that are punctuated *occasionally by brief phases of institutional flux...critical junctures...during which more dramatic change is possible*” [emphasis added]. In essence, this approach requires that political struggles have been more or less settled and a ‘new pathway’ clearly established; this is manifestly not the case for contemporary Thailand where ‘stability’ – if it ever existed – has not been restored.

In seeking to understand political crisis, Friedrichs (1980: 540) argues that it should be considered “a *turning point*, often brought about by a convergence of events which create new circumstances threatening established goals and requiring action; it is further characterized by pressures, tensions and uncertainties” [emphasis added]. With contemporary Thailand’s political crisis being ongoing, while I will suggest that conflict means that a turning point has been reached, the threat to “established goals” and conservative structures may yet be seen off.

<sup>1</sup>For an earlier account of persistent ‘cycles’ of political and economic struggle, see Bell (1978).

In order to better assess the nature of Thailand's political crisis, it is first necessary to reject functionalist approaches that consider that political conflict is not disruptive but a kind of system maintaining 'safety valve'. Rather, conflict should be seen as defining of the relationships between various social groups and classes and where conflict situations are reflective of shifting and unequal resources and power, and where the legitimacy of dominant groups is challenged (see Rex 1961: 115–135). This conflict perspective suggests the need to consider the approaches of Karl Marx and Max Weber.

In Marxist theory, the consideration of crises has tended to emphasise economic crises. Yet the idea of disjunctures, turning points, or watersheds is fundamental to Marxist understandings of change as revolution. Such conjunctures and resulting struggles are seen to be based in economic production but are obviously played out in political activism (see Marx and Engels 2004). However, to develop the analysis of contemporary Thailand, I begin with Weber's (1970) famous essay on *Class, Status, Party*. In beginning with this approach, I refer to Weber broadly for situating the discussion of Thailand's recent politics. Weber's approach, particularly to the relationship between status and class, is not without its shortcomings. For example, while considering class, status, and party separately, as Weber's essay did, has the advantage of providing considerable focus, it also tends to separate three colours on a canvas that is, in fact, far richer. Hence, in dealing with status and class, I also draw on Marxist approaches.

While Weber is sometimes considered to have rejected the economic determinism attributed to Marxist analysis, his remarks on class and status *in periods of transformation* are worthy of consideration:

“When the bases of the acquisition and distribution of goods are relatively stable, stratification by status is favoured. Every technological repercussion and economic transformation threatens stratification by status and pushes the class situation into the foreground. Epochs and countries in which the naked class situation is of predominant significance are regularly the periods of technical and economic transformations. And every slowing down of the shifting of economic stratifications leads, in due course, to the growth of status structures and makes for a resuscitation of the important role of social honour.” (Weber 1970: 193–194)

It is evident that Weber does not reject Marxist approaches emphasizing class situations, yet he develops his concepts of class, status and party as a means to distinguish between economic and political power (see Gerth and Mills 1970: 47). As will be outlined, Weber's observations that class and status are related but different appears out of kilter with events that saw these forms of stratification and distribution of power intertwined in a period of tumultuous political conflict marked by the electoral rise of Thaksin Shinawatra and his Thai Rak Thai

(TRT) Party, their demise under the military boot, and the political struggle that has ensued.

In the following section, the paper provides a contextualization of the political crisis and then proceeds by using Weber's concepts of class, status, and party as a means to explain how a political watershed has been reached.

## THE CONTEXT OF POLITICAL CRISIS

Thaksin and TRT gained election following a period of extensive economic growth and change. That period was precipitously concluded in 1997 by the most significant economic crisis in several decades. Thaksin and his party then presided over further fundamental changes that ran the gamut of the economic, social and political spheres. These changes were soon opposed by several important social groups, often referred to as 'the elite' and most especially the hierarchical institutions mentioned above. That opposition led to the 2006 military coup and a series of sometimes violent political confrontations that have continued until today. In order to adequately conceptualise how this period may represent a turning point, it is important to provide the necessary background for assessing changes to class, status, and party.

Thailand once had an enviable economic record, not having experienced anything other than growth in per capita GDP from 1957 until 1997.<sup>2</sup> From the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, the country experienced a remarkable economic boom that had enormous economic and social impacts. As the urbanized and industrialized economic sectors expanded, Thailand's population became better educated, healthier and wealthier. Notably, the benefits of economic growth in the 1980–90s were extended beyond Bangkok where much of growth over the four previous decades had been concentrated.

In 1960, 82% of the economically active population was in agriculture. Prior to the economic crisis, in 1990, this had declined to 63% and has declined further to 41% in 2008 (Asian Development Bank 2011: 17). As stark as these data are, they understate the magnitude of change as most of the remaining agricultural families have come to rely on off-farm income to reproduce themselves and to maintain the family farm. Employment in non-agricultural activities has grown by leaps and bounds. Between 1979 and 1998, the workforce expanded by more than 50% or almost 11 million persons, with the manufacturing workforce almost tripling over the period. Women made up half of the manufacturing workforce by 1992 (see Hewison 2006).

Related, and linked to Weber's comments on technology, there was an expansion of productivity as technology-based manufacturing has grown and the economy has been ever more deeply enmeshed within global production

<sup>2</sup>These data are from the late Angus Maddison's spreadsheet available at: <http://www.ggdc.net/MADDISON/oriindex.htm> (accessed on 12 October 2011).

chains (see Archanun and Nipon 2011; Lauridsen 2009). Additionally, the expansion of consumer technologies, such as computers, mobile phones, motorcycles and automobiles, has greatly changed economic and social life.<sup>3</sup> This technological development, the long economic boom, and rising incomes saw the growth of a provincial class of “new rich” that engaged in local and national politics. Of course, not everyone benefited equally from the economic boom, and for many years Thailand has ranked inordinately high on measures of inequality (see Pasuk 2011).

These changes have also given rise to new expectations about how society might be organised. In politics, there was some optimism that democratization would follow on the heels of the bloody civilian uprising of May 1992 when people massed to (belatedly) reject the 1991 military coup and resist attempts to have the putsch leader made prime minister (Hewison 1997a; Ockey 2004; Pasuk and Baker 2000). That security forces opened fire and killed demonstrators saw them disgraced and for a time it seemed that military interventionism was being reduced as more space was made for political reform. Debates centred on the draft of a new constitution but became bogged down in old-style horse-trading amongst grasping politicians.

At this point, in July 1997, the Asian economic crisis began in Thailand. The country’s deepest economic downturn in 50 years saw a struggling coalition government replaced by a Democrat Party-led administration. The economic shock also re-energised a constitutional reform process that had been debated and delayed for several years, with a new constitution quickly processed and promulgated in August 1997. The constitution appeared to reflect a new civilian political dominance in politics following the events of 1992. While the drafting process had remained an elite-dominated project, debates between conservatives, royalists, civil society organizations and intellectuals saw opportunities for political participation embedded in the new basic law (Hewison 2007; McCargo 2002). Thaksin was to be the only prime minister to face the electorate under this reformist constitution.

Formed by Thaksin in 1998, TRT rocketed to prominence on the back of massive public discontent with the Democrat Party-led government’s policies that had failed to bring the country out of the economic crisis. In attempting to deal with the crisis, the government had implemented policies that reflected both its own economic liberalism and the policy dictates of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The government came to be accused of obsequiousness

<sup>3</sup>Data from the World Bank’s World Development Indicators ([http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/world-development-indicators?cid=GPD\\_WDI](http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/world-development-indicators?cid=GPD_WDI)) indicates the rapid expansion of energy consumption since the mid-1980s, the fast growth of internet use since the late 1990s, and the explosion of mobile phone use since the late 1990s. Passenger vehicle, pickup truck and motorcycle ownership has also expanded remarkably since the early 1990s (see Department of Commerce n.d.: 2–4). The ownership of other consumer technologies has expanded equally rapidly.

before the liberalising demands of the IMF and foreign business interests (Hewison 2006).

Thaksin and TRT's popularity owed much to policies that promised an alternative to the Democrat Party and IMF-imposed liberalisation. TRT developed a platform that became the party's electoral "brand". Thaksin and TRT also delivered on their campaign policies once elected. 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 made Thaksin personally popular.

Elsewhere I have explained that TRT's electoral platform amounted to a new social contract (Hewison 2004). Thaksin's initial task was to save the domestic business class in the face of increased international competition. To do this TRT needed the support of voters in the most populous provincial electorates. By offering social welfare, income support and ideas about how the poor might get ahead, TRT won a record vote in the 2001 election. The economic crisis and a fear of social conflict were enough to convince the elite that it should accept TRT's new social contract with the potentially unruly masses.

No past government had ever taken much interest in the masses in such a positive way. In an unequal and hierarchical society, this was ground-breaking, remarkably popular and showed voters that a more responsive government was possible.

It is not an exaggeration to say that Thaksin changed the way political parties operate both in electioneering and in office (Hewison 2010a). The business tycoon in Thaksin sent him in search of what the political "market" wanted. He brought in bright, grassroots-connected advisers who had ideas about poverty reduction and other local-level issues. Thaksin and TRT were able to gain and use information that permitted the development of electorally popular policies (Pasuk and Baker 2009: 80–82). Of course, Thaksin and TRT also used old-style political methods, incorporating local politicians and small parties, being authoritarian and splashing money about. However, for the electorate, it was the connection to the grassroots that gained their attention.<sup>4</sup> TRT also emphasised inclusiveness in its campaigning, proffering, as an electioneering slogan, *New Thinking, New Ways, For All Thais*.

Coming to politics in a severe economic downturn assisted Thaksin and TRT in making changes that unsettled the conservative elite. The appeal to the voting public was an important first step in this re-balancing. Thaksin was also able to reduce the power of many of the local political and economic godfathers – the *chao pho* – who had dominated local-level politics and had considerable weight at the national level (McVey 2000). These political changes, together

<sup>4</sup>Many businesspeople also supported TRT and its policies also resonated with a range of intellectuals and leaders of civil society groups who had abandoned the Democrat Party and attacked its policies.

with a recovering economy and more promises to the poor, made Thaksin immensely popular. It was no surprise that TRT was re-elected in 2005 with by far the largest parliamentary majority ever in Thailand.

It is also evident that, when coupled with its promises to poor and rural voters, TRT's campaigning and initial actions in government resonated with a range of voters and gave impetus to developing political aspirations amongst many who felt they had been politically ignored under past regimes. These aspirations – initially expressed in voting and in notions of enhanced voice – saw Thaksin become the first prime minister to be re-elected and at the head of a political party that controlled parliament in its own right. It is at this point that developing differences between Thaksin and his supporters and the conservative elite became clear. The conservative elite is a relatively small group identified by Pasuk and Baker (1997) as comprising the most senior civil and military officials, metropolitan business and technocrats, and provincial business. They also identify two non-elite groups: “peasants” (smallholder agricultural producers) and urban workers. The cleavages to be discussed below are broadly arranged in and around these social groups and classes. I will begin an examination of these cleavages, with an account of the Weberian concept of ‘party’ in Thai politics.

## PARTY AND THAILAND'S POLITICS

Thaksin's and TRT's electoral and political successes marked it as both innovative and as having widespread support. Most analysts agree that TRT was something new in the landscape of Thailand's political parties. Remaining unfinished at Weber's death, and the last section in his famous essay, in developing his position on ‘party’, Weber (1970: 194–195) did not spend a lot of time explaining it. In fact, it is the least problematic of his ‘Class, Status, Party’ triplet.

In discussing party, Weber (1970: 194) comments that “parties live in a house of ‘power’.” Party, then, is about influencing collective action to gain and use power. In taking this approach, Weber is very much writing of the modern political party. While noting earlier forms of party, Weber views modern parties as engaged in rational action and planning (Gane 2005: 220). A sometimes neglected element of Weber's account of party is the notion that a party will be reflective of the communities and the “structure of domination” in which they rise (Weber 1970: 195).

This latter point is certainly apposite for Thailand where, until the 1997 constitution and the birth of TRT, political parties were located in a political milieu where parliament was a place of shifting loyalties, relatively ineffectual and unimportant when compared with the executive and extra-parliamentary political actors. In this system, coalition governments were the norm, continually destabilised by their tenuous (and expensive) existence. When the military did not rule

directly, governments came and went with regularity, a result of smaller parties continually renegotiating their cabinet positions and seeking a means to bolster personal and party coffers while also positioning them for the vote-buying that characterised elections and the horse-trading that followed. Behind this weak parliamentary and party system, real political power resided with conservative and hierarchical bodies including the military, Ministry of Interior, and the monarchy.

While the literature on political parties in Thailand has not often drawn an explicit link to Weber, there is a common and implicit adherence to Weberian (and Western-oriented) ideal-types of political party. As McCargo (1997) has pointed out, there are several approaches to parties in Thailand and each has determined that existing parties are not “real” parties. Hence, these studies have lamented the failure of parties to establish patterns that are said to mark the ideal-typical or ‘real’ political party. The lists of party failures are long and focus on the alleged ills of rural political activity. Rural and poor voters are shown to be: subject to vote-buying; under the influence of *chao pho*; manipulated through patron-client relations; ignorant and uneducated; and with little notion of the “national good”. In short, these rural people, their patrons and the resulting political patterns are portrayed as a drag on modern and rational political and party development (Callahan 2005).

The 1997 constitution sought an essentially elitist legal fix for the allegedly poor state of Thailand’s parties. The provisions that enabled this fix sought strong government (as opposed to a weak coalition) and sought to do this by legally strengthening the executive branch, discouraging small parties and coalitions and strengthening party discipline over its members (Hewison 2007; McCargo 2002).

Thaksin seemed to recognize that the new constitution demanded a different kind of politics. In power, he accrued tremendous power to himself, TRT and his cabinet. Thaksin was a strong prime minister – arguably the most dominant civilian leader in the country’s history – at the head of a political party that held large majorities in parliament to the extent that in 2005 just four parties won seats in parliament, and TRT won almost 75% of these. TRT’s 2005 election slogan was *The Heart of TRT is the People*. Populist it might have been, but the party and Thaksin were rewarded with stellar popularity. Arguably, the most significant impact of the constitutional changes and the Thaksin-TRT period in government was the development of a widespread feeling of empowerment amongst groups who previously felt left out of elite-dominated politics. As Pasuk and Baker state, the feeling of empowerment came:

“...partly through the very real impact of the programmes, partly through the impression that Thaksin and his party were responsive to their demands, and partly because the schemes positioned each citizen in an equal and direct relationship with the state.” (Pasuk and Baker 2008: 68)

Many saw Thaksin and TRT as bringing government to the people and as making government responsive to the people. It might be argued that this was merely perception. However, perception matters in party politics, and no political party had managed this in the past.

The Thaksin-TRT approach was radical. Thailand's elite was used to ignoring farmers and workers – the majority of the population – except when they needed to be put in their political place. Thaksin's perhaps unintentional radicalism meant that the conservative elite came to believe that it faced a threat to its political control from a popular and populist political party. The result was the 2006 military coup, the writing of a new constitution enacted in 2007, and the political conflict that was to ensue. Remarkably, even the coup, usually a system resetting intervention, was insufficient to change perceptions and political affiliations. Pro-Thaksin political parties were to dominate electoral politics even after Thaksin went into exile.

Following the coup, the military, its appointed government, and then the Democrat Party-led and military-backed coalition government attempted to re-establish elite domination over politics. It did this in multiple ways. The military expended considerable effort attempting to embed political rules that would re-establish elite domination. It enshrined these rules in a new constitution, after the junta established, tutored and controlled the bodies drafting the regressive basic law (Hewison 2010b).

Its intervention directly targeted the elements of the 1997 constitution that had empowered Thaksin and his party: it weakened the executive branch, reinstated the decision-making power of the bureaucracy and other unelected bodies, and enhanced the military's political role and budget (Thi 2007). The military attempted to obtain popular legitimacy for its constitution by having it approved in the country's first-ever constitutional referendum. However, the heavy-handedness of the military and other conservatives in trying to force a positive vote saw the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC 2007: 1) describe a "heavy-handed undemocratic atmosphere", observing that the "junta...coerced, threatened, bought and cajoled part of the electorate."

Following the coup, the military also sought to change political allegiances. It did this through 'psych-ops' campaigns, reminiscent of the period of anti-communist counterinsurgency, and emphasizing loyalty to the monarchy. The underlying principle seemed to be that those who voted for Thaksin and TRT were duped, paid or ignorant but essentially remained 'loyal'. All that was required was to enlighten these people of Thaksin's failures, his corruption and of his 'disloyalty' and they would return to their past political passivity under enlightened elite domination, backed by the military. These campaigns specifically targeted communities known to have voted for TRT.

During the period of the Democrat Party-led government (2008–2011), the conservative elite apparently recognized that there was something more to the support for Thaksin and his parties than money or ignorance. This royalist

government embarked on a vast campaign that poured state funds into the countryside, hoping that their policies and spending would wean people from their Thaksin ‘addiction’. Democrat Party leaders repeatedly proclaimed that their government had provided even more for the poor than Thaksin (see, for example, Kraissak 2010).

The judicial system was also used to target Thaksin, his family and his parties. It is not necessary to consider debates over the legal validity of the cases as, for the purpose of this account, it is the targeting, proceedings, and outcomes that are significant. The level of investigation and court cases against Thaksin and his political allies is unmatched in modern times. These included, but were not limited to: a lottery case, finding 43 ministers were ‘manipulated’ by Thaksin; the Supreme Court’s assets case that saw Thaksin lose 46 billion baht; multiple charges by the Attorney General; various cases against pro-Thaksin politicians including two former pro-Thaksin prime ministers and two senior pro-Thaksin ministers; and several *lese majeste* allegations and cases. Most notable, in terms of party, was the legal dissolution of TRT in 2007 and of several other pro-Thaksin parties in 2008, resulting in the banning of more than 200 politicians. In other words, the legal system was seen as being used to neuter pro-Thaksin political parties and diminish their popular support.

Related, during the 2006 to 2011 period, Thailand witnessed an astonishing upsurge in political repression. All of the major human rights organizations have documented a rise in media censorship, including tens of thousands of URLs, the imprisonment of several hundred political opponents, often using emergency laws, and an unprecedented surge in *lese majeste* accusations and charges (see, for example, Human Rights Watch 2011). The emphasis on ‘protecting the monarchy’ from pro-Thaksin ‘republicans’ indicated a campaign to paint opponents as disloyal and a threat to the system of rule that had the monarchy at its apex.

In terms of Weber’s “house of ‘power’”, the most emphatic statement of the desire of the conservative elite to re-establish the domination of its own party – the Democrat Party – was the use of state violence. First in 2009 and then twice in 2010 the military engaged in a violent suppression of pro-Thaksin, red shirt demonstrators. Nearly 100 people died and some 2500 were injured over the two years. The use of the state’s repressive powers was meant to prevent a Thaksin party regaining power and to maintain and reinforce the conservative elite’s political rule.

Remarkably, in the face of relentless establishment pressure, force and violence, there has been an unparalleled commitment by ‘non-elites’ to elections and to pro-Thaksin parties. The People’s Power Party (PPP), which inherited the TRT’s mantle following the latter’s dissolution, won an unexpected electoral victory in the 2007 election. It was unexpected due to the military’s efforts to prevent the PPP doing well. When PPP and its coalition parties were dissolved in a hurried court decision in late 2008, and replaced by a Democrat Party-led coalition, the substitute pro-Thaksin Pheu Thai Party eventually won a large

majority in the 2011 election. Again, this support for a pro-Thaksin party came despite military threats. The military's position was clearest when the Army commander appeared on national television to demand that voters support the monarchy and reject the Pheu Thai Party (Bangkok Post 2011).

Whether TRT and its successor parties were 'real' political parties seemed to matter little to voters. They see them as representative of their concerns. One of the noteworthy outcomes of Thaksin's five years in government was that he and his parties established a political loyalty that has been shown to be real and long-standing. As explained above, Thaksin and TRT loyalty was, at least in part, built on policy. This was a new development and has been reflected in the fact that TRT and its successor parties have now won every election since 2000 (2001, 2005, 2006,<sup>5</sup> 2007 and 2011). These results indicate a dogged determination by voters to make their choice and to support the electoral system. It is also a statement of the rejection of the conservative elite's domination of politics.

## STATUS AND THAILAND'S POLITICS

In the events of the past 15 to 20 years, status has been central to the social and political cleavages that have become ever more obvious in Thailand. In particular, the red shirt movement draws on widely-held notions regarding the essential unfairness of the social order. The movement proclaimed Thai society unequal and unjust (UDD 2010). It used emotive shibboleths to challenge the established hierarchies founded in inequality (Volpe 2012).

When the red shirts opposed the *amart* – the conservative aristocratic elite – they emphasised double standards, injustice, inequality, and the role of individuals seen as associated with the palace, including a gaggle of privy councillors. They portrayed themselves as *phrai* or 'commoners', carefully choosing a word drawn from the period of the absolute monarchy (Haberkorn 2010). The implication was clear: as the red shirts faced the military's guns, they were attacking the bases of domination, with the monarchy emerging in the rhetoric to be symbolic of the system of domination and all that was considered wrong with the social order. As red shirt leader Nattawutt Saikua explained, the use of this feudal terminology was to illustrate that the "struggle isn't against the government, not about Thaksin, Abhisit or the Democrat Party or Thai Rak Thai Party. *The big question is who should have the supreme power in Thai society*" (The Nation 2010 [emphasis added]). Particular status groups must certainly have felt challenged by this movement and its rhetoric.

Weber (1970: 187) comments on "status honour," as "a specific *style of life*... [that is]...nurtured by belief in a providential 'mission' and by a belief in a specific

<sup>5</sup>The 2006 election victory may be excluded as the election was boycotted by the Democrat Party and two other opposition parties, and was later annulled by the courts.

honour before God” (Weber 1970: 190). Further, Weber explains how his position distinguishes class and status:

“In contrast to the purely economically determined ‘class situation’ we wish to designate as “status situation” every typical component of the life fate of men that is determined by a specific, positive or negative, social estimation of honour.... [S]tatus honour need not necessarily be linked with a ‘class situation’. On the contrary, it normally stands in sharp opposition to the pretensions of sheer property...” (Weber 1970: 186–187)

Structuralists have long criticized this position, with Turner explaining, several decades ago: “Weber’s attempt to separate out power (political parties), status (status groups) and economy (classes defined in terms of the market) entails *the assumption* that the concrete individuals who constitute such ‘groups’ are in some sense outside or above class relations” (1977: 7 [emphasis in the original]). Indeed, for Thailand, market position and status have considerable overlap.

Lists of the richest people in Thailand are regularly published yet rarely mention the monarchy. For example, a 2011 ranking had Dhanin Chearavanont of the Charoen Pokphand Group at the top, worth US\$7.4 billion (Mertens 2011). Yet this is less than a quarter of the wealth of the royal house’s Crown Property Bureau (CPB). Its wealth is calculated at \$37 billion through its large swathes of valuable property and ownership of some of the country’s largest corporations (Grossman and Faulder 2011).<sup>6</sup>

This large fortune locates the monarchy at the summit of the capitalist class and suggests a capacity for the monopolisation of opportunities and of some specific areas of investment (Weber 1970: 190). Yet it is the status of the monarchy and royal family that clearly distinguishes them. Indeed, the state (and, hence, taxpayers) expend huge sums each year to maintain the monarchy’s status position. Fuller (2011) suggests that the amount spent is “\$350 million

<sup>6</sup>The first definitive academic account of the CPB was by Porphant (2008). The figure cited here is his updated calculation from his contribution to the semi-official publication by Grossman and Faulder (2011). Weber (1970: 192) considered that when “mere economic acquisition and naked economic power” can bestow honour, then the “status order would be threatened at its very root.” He argues that status groups are a hindrance to the development of market forces (Weber 1970: 185; see also Gane 2005: 219). In fact, Weber sees a conflict between “social honour” and the market’s impersonal relations when he writes: “Honour abhors hard bargaining among peers and occasionally it taboos it for the members of the status group...” (cited in Gane 2005: 219). For the status group, participating in the market is considered “stigmatizing.” In Thailand, the monarchy seems to have been able to marry the two (Herzog *et al.* 2013). In an earlier paper I suggested that Thaksin – certainly an example of “mere economic acquisition and naked economic power” – challenged the status order represented by the monarchy (Hewison 2008). As briefly noted in that paper, there is a position amongst royalists that Thaksin and his ilk were too grasping and too driven by markets and money; this marks something of a distinction in *attitude* towards markets.

in taxpayer money.”<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the state, and particularly its paramount institution, the military, make remarkable efforts to ensure devotion to the throne and on vast displays of loyalty.

Fabulous wealth and generous state funding have much to do with maintaining a lifestyle that is, in Weber’s (1970: 190) words, “nurtured by belief in a providential ‘mission’ and by a belief in a specific honour before God.” The popular and palace account is that the present king, while now aged, is a truly great and versatile man with remarkable abilities (see Hewison 1997b). He sits on a throne that is claimed to have a direct link to the thirteenth century Sukhothai kingdom (Grossman and Faulder 2011: 17). Good kings are virtuous and paternalistic with royalists making much of their view that the king is a demi-god. This leads to the assertion that the monarchy is ‘natural’. Support from the monarchy remains an indispensable source of political legitimacy. A political leader or regime, even a popularly elected government, cannot be truly legitimized without the king’s blessing. As Wright (1991: 59–60) put it, “the king is a force that spiritually binds the Thais together as a nation and links their heritage to the future. The supreme national symbol, his prestige attaches to him the aura of legitimacy.”

The royalist military junta, justifying its coup in 2006, claimed that Thaksin challenged the status and aura of the monarchy (CDR 2006), and later, Thaksin was cast at the centre of a conspiracy by elements of the red shirt movement that was considered republican and bent on overthrowing the monarchy (Bangkok Post 2010).

The rise of the red shirts is one of those brief periods of subaltern rebellion that goes beyond the more mundane forms of everyday resistance that rarely amount to a fundamental challenge to the established order. The red shirts offered trenchant critique, and street- and village-level activism to oppose the conservative elite with the monarchy at its apex. This challenge, while not overtly republican, unsettled the elite. They opposed this red shirt challenge with an extensive use of the state’s repressive power while reasserting monarchy and elite rule as natural and culturally Thai. This affirmation of the right to rule draws on deeply conservative conceptions of order, authority, and morals that are intertwined with the position of the monarchy and which reject Western-style democracy for a society that is considered culturally amenable to strong authority figures who unify the nation while upholding Buddhist-based moral principles (see Hewison and Kengkij 2010). Such conservative ideas have underpinned military dictatorships in the past and, after the 2006 coup, were a basis for the reinvigoration of the royalism. The red shirts contested this royalist ideology by directing their attacks at members of the king’s advisory Privy Council and the *amart*. The red shirts knew that direct political challenges to royalism were complicated by the uncertainties of royal succession, repression and the power of the military. As noted above, they adopted an anti-establishment rhetoric focused on fairness, equality and justice.

<sup>7</sup>By comparison, the British crown reports that it received some \$51 million a year from the taxpayer (see Royal Household 2011).

The elite's response has emphasised the ideology of conservative royalism that has been heavily policed. Following the coup, censorship, and the use of the *lese majeste* law as well as the Computer Crimes Act expanded significantly. In December 2008, then Army chief General Anupong Paojinda declared that criticism of the monarchy was a matter of "national security". He set up units to monitor the internet and ordered sweeps of alleged anti-monarchy strongholds in the north and northeast. The Democrat Party, which came to government in late 2008, supported this royalism and repression. In official announcements, "protection of the monarchy" as a matter of "national security" was listed at the top of the Government's priorities (Royal Thai Embassy 2009). There were repeated promises to stamp out criticism and strengthen the laws protecting the monarchy and its status position.

By early 2010, more than 50,000 websites and web pages were reportedly blocked (IFEX 2010). The Democrat Party-led administration proceeded to block tens of thousands more URLs, closed numerous community radio stations, expanded online surveillance and closed almost all opposition publications (Sawatree *et al.* 2010). New *lese majeste* cases expanded from an average of just over five per year in the period 1992–2005, to an average of almost 100 per year in 2006–2009 (International Crisis Group 2011: 13).<sup>8</sup> Following the government's crackdown on red shirt protesters in May 2010, several hundred alleged red shirts were imprisoned,<sup>9</sup> and alleged red shirts experienced arbitrary arrest, detention, torture and forced interrogation.

In general terms, the red shirts and their supporters maintained their opposition. The period under discussion has witnessed a noteworthy *rejection* of repression, the culture of deference and adulation of the monarchy. This attack on status was meant to undermine the status myths that had maintained a conservative and elite-dominated political regime since the late 1950s. The challenge has ranged from dissidents poking fun at the monarchy, pointing to the overlap of status and great wealth, undermining its 'aura', political opposition, persistent voting patterns, and mass uprisings. The red shirts have (re-)embedded ideas about fairness, equality and justice in the Thai political milieu in a manner that ensures that the conservative elite and, indeed, the monarchy itself, can never again believe that Thailand is exclusively theirs. This cleavage became especially clear during Thaksin's period as prime minister and has since been converted into the shibboleth of *amart* versus *phrai*.

## CLASS AND THAILAND'S POLITICS

During the second rising of the red shirts, from late 2009, its leadership came to focus on issues related to both status and class. As noted above, the protesters

<sup>8</sup>There are an undisclosed number of convictions and charges pending under the *lese majeste* law.

<sup>9</sup>In mid-January 2012, more than 50 remained in jail.

adopted the old words *phrai* and *amart* as a couplet to symbolise their struggle. Most of the issues raised by the red shirts revolved around deeply felt and easily recognised issues of status, class and inequality.

Recent theorists have suggested that whereas Marx viewed economic location as underpinning many social outcomes, for Weber, class was essentially a “non-social” form (Gane 2005: 212–13). Weber (1970) notes this when he states:

“In our terminology, ‘classes’ are not communities; they merely represent...bases for communal action. We may speak of a ‘class’ when (1) a number of people have in common a specific causal component of their life chances, in so far as (2) this component is represented exclusively by economic interests in the possession of goods and opportunities for income, and (3) is represented under the conditions of the commodity or labour markets.” (Weber 1970: 181)

Classes are not communal because they are not constituted of individuals brought together on the basis of subjective feelings about belonging.

In Thailand, however, we have seen remarkable demonstrations of those subjective feelings indicating class solidarity. One manifestation of this came on 20 March 2010, with a demonstration of solidarity between red shirts and Bangkok’s service and working people. For much of that day, a red shirt convoy wound through the capital’s streets, receiving an overwhelming reception from crowds lining the streets. For those in power, this demonstration of solidarity and potential political power can only have been traumatizing. That camaraderie continued during the red shirt rally from March to May 2010.

There is limited data on the red shirts and their organisation. That which is available tends to be impressionistic or based on surveys of activist members that collect data on income and attitudes.<sup>10</sup> However, the argument here is for a broader and class-based interpretation of Thailand’s political conflict. The discussion that follows focuses on the underlying antagonisms born of different and inherently conflicting material positions. In capitalist society, as Weber observed, these different material positions are built on differential life chances. In terms of available data, we may examine poverty, income and inequality (for more details, see Hewison 2012).

Poverty levels have been studied for several decades and the data are clear, showing a significant reduction in absolute poverty, albeit based on absurdly low poverty lines.<sup>11</sup> Between 1988 and 2004, poverty declined from almost 45%

<sup>10</sup>Perhaps the most comprehensive account in English is by Naruemon and McCargo (2011). That account, by focusing on activists, neglects the broader support for pro-Thaksin parties and the red shirt movement.

<sup>11</sup>In 2007, one official poverty line was 1443 baht per person per month. The minimum wage, variable by province, was about 140 baht per day at the time. Hence, the poverty line was about one-third of the minimum wage.

nationwide to just over 11% in 2004. The 2004 poverty instance was just under 5% in urban areas and the rate had declined from 52.9% to 14.3% in rural areas (Warr 2009: 164). Despite these declines, poverty remains a social and political issue, with some seven million people still living below the poverty line. Most of these are rural people, often landless or with small holdings and with low education. According to the UNDP (2010: 123–152) more than 80% of those in poverty were in the North and Northeastern regions.

The National Statistical Office (NSO) has collected income data for a long period in regular household surveys, showing a steady rise over a long period. In 2007, the national average monthly household income was 18,660 baht. In Bangkok it was nearly twice this figure at 35,007 baht. In the North and Northeast, average incomes were roughly one-third of the Bangkok figure. If we consider provinces that have incomes of two-thirds of the nationwide average in 2007, there are 15: one in the South, five in the North and nine in the Northeast. The NSO's 2007 household survey revealed that the national average per capita income for the poorest 10% of the population was just 1001 baht per month. In the North it was 872 baht and in the Northeast a meagre 797 baht (NSO 2007).

Related, it is noteworthy that, since 1960, capital's share of GDP has increased while labour's share has declined. Productivity increases by labour have accrued to capital through increased profits. Since 2000, the profit rate has increased from about 5% to almost 11%. Economists show that the increase in profit rate has come from squeezing workers out of their share in income derived from labour productivity. In other words, there has been a redistribution of income to capital (Mounier and Voravidh 2010).

Shareholding and business concentration is important. In an analysis following the economic crisis, the World Bank came to the startling conclusion that the major source of inequality was in *profits*.<sup>12</sup> And profits have increasingly been monopolized by the largest businesses. In 2000, the largest 20% of firms gained 81% of the income and this expanded to 86.3% in 2008 (Nidhi 2010).

Poverty reduction and rising incomes have not been accompanied by reduced inequality because income increases have been greater for the already well-off. Thailand's Gini index has worsened from about 0.4 in the 1960s to 0.5 and above in the period since the mid-1980s. The ratio of incomes held by the top 20% has been 12–14 times that of the bottom 20% for a very long time. This pattern is also seen in measures of wealth. Official 2007 figures show that the top 10% of families controlled more than 51% of wealth, while the bottom 50% controlled just 8.5%. For land, houses and other assets, a similar pattern of inequality is evident (Duangmanee 2010).

As noted above, as the country's largest conglomerate, the monarchy's CPB, is at the apex of this economic system. This suggests that Weber's (1970: 180)

<sup>12</sup>“[E]ven though nonfarm profits...constitute only 22% of total income, their contribution to overall income inequality is...56%.” (World Bank 2001: 30).

comment that “‘economically conditioned’ power is not...identical with ‘power’” does not seem to hold for Thailand. We can also argue that Weber’s conception of class as purely about market and property is also misconceived for the processes seen in Thailand.<sup>13</sup> Weber is clear that class action can result from a market situation and the “different life-chances that arise from the uneven distribution of material property” (Gane 2005: 216). To move beyond Weber’s notion of class, it is necessary to indicate how political action is social. This is no easy task when assessing nationwide political movements and allegiances.

My suggested solution is to argue that social solidarity can be seen in voting patterns. In another paper, without making statistical correlations between political mobilization and the data summarized above, I concentrated on voting patterns from recent elections (Hewison 2012). Given the manner in which politics has been polarized, to determine support for broad ‘pro-Thaksin’ and ‘anti-Thaksin’ coalitions seems of some significance. It also goes beyond overly narrow concentrations on incomes, attitudes, and activists.

For the period from 2001 to 2011, voting patterns are clear. In 2001, Thaksin and TRT very nearly won a majority of the seats in the lower house. There was a spatial pattern in the voting, with TRT supported strongly in the North, in most parts of the Northeast and in a number of provinces in the Central region. TRT also received strong support in Bangkok. The lack of support in the South, except in the southernmost provinces, is usually explained by the dominance of the Democrat Party organising apparatus.<sup>14</sup> As noted above, in the 2005 election, TRT won a landslide. In the North, TRT gained 71 of the 76 seats. In the Northeast, it took 126 of the 136 seats, won 80 of the 97 contests in the Central region, and 32 of 37 seats in Bangkok. The lack of support in the South was repeated. The next voting opportunity came with the referendum on the draft 2007 constitution. The use of government and military resources to determine a ‘yes’ vote was enormous and the repression of those opposed to the constitution significant. Even so, those who were prepared to oppose were overwhelmingly in the North and Northeast. The strongest support for the military’s constitution was in the Democrat Party-dominated South. Not long after this, the 2007 election was held and the pro-Thaksin PPP emerged with the highest number of seats. Its support was strongest in the North and Northeast, with some support in the Central region. The Democrat Party was supported in the South and Bangkok. The commercial heart of the city voted overwhelmingly for the Democrat Party. Bangkok was ringed by PPP seats, matching the pattern of factory

<sup>13</sup>Weber did note that those who were propertyless were at a disadvantage in the marketplace, arguing that those who only have their own labour to exchange often do little more than “subsist”. His basic characteristic of class are “property” and the “lack of property” (Weber 1970: 182). He considered the modern class struggle to be “price wars in the labour market” (Weber 1970: 185).

<sup>14</sup>It is also worth recalling that average incomes in nine of the fourteen southern provinces exceed the national average.

development and working class dormitory suburbs around the city. Finally, in 2011, the pro-Thaksin Pheu Thai Party again won a majority (see Baker 2011). The spatial patterns were similar to previous elections, although more emphatic than in 2001: the Northeast was overwhelmingly for Pheu Thai; the North and Central regions were strongly Pheu Thai, with Bangkok almost encircled by Pheu Thai seats.

The spatial overlap between voting patterns and regions of high inequality, low incomes and poverty is unmistakable. It is further emphasized by the UNDP (2010: 78) when it concluded that 2007 average per capita gross provincial product in the provinces that voted for the Democrat Party was 221,130 baht per year. The corresponding figure for the provinces supporting the pro-Thaksin PPP was just 92,667 baht per year. The UNDP (2010: 78) is correct to state that, at the very least, “it is difficult to contend that inequality is not a contributing background factor” in recent political conflict and, it could be added, voting patterns.

Relatively low incomes, skewed ownership and the siphoning of income to the already rich suggest a long-standing pattern of exploitation. It is reasonable to assume that those who are exploited are aware of their situation. They have missed out on the gains from growth and have seen their relative shares of income and wealth reduced and productivity gains removed from them. Such awareness may be expressed in several ways. What the data show is that when voting has been permitted, those located in areas that do poorly on the economic indicators have supported political parties perceived as having programs that support their interests.

While many analysts disagree with the red shirt uprising of 2009–2010 being labelled a class war, putting the data and related evidence outlined above in context suggests that there are some good reasons to at least agree with the characterization of red shirts as supported by people who have long understood economic disadvantage and exploitation.

## THAILAND'S TURNING POINT

In assessing turning points, crises and critical junctures, theorists from several theoretical positions seek evidence that the balance of power between competing social and political groups has been upended or at least significantly shifted in ways that establish a new relationship between the contending groups such that a new or significantly altered political trajectory emerges. As was noted in the introduction to this paper, for Thailand, assessing the degree of change is exceptionally difficult when the struggle is ongoing. However, by examining the issues of party, status, and class, the paper has indicated that the patterns of the past have been significantly changed.

It is certainly true that Thailand's social and political cleavages developed from a period of remarkable and rapid economic change that saw the modern

and more technological sectors of the economy expand as never before. This has seen challenges to what Weber calls 'status honour' and has also seen the 'naked class situation' come to the fore.

Thailand is now at a critical political juncture, where the forces that congregate around old ideas associated with status honour – hierarchy, social closure and inequality, 'Thai-style democracy' and privilege – are arrayed against forces that champion equality, access, voting and populism. While the balance of forces would suggest that the latter have achieved significant change, reaction is also possible, and historical turning points can see unexpected outcomes. Interestingly, as Weber noted for such contests in Europe in the time he was writing an outcome was Fascism. If the conservative elite remains defiant and unwilling to make much needed political compromises, unexpected outcomes become more likely.

### Acknowledgements

The author gratefully acknowledges the support provided by the School of Social Sciences, Singapore Management University and a W.N. Reynolds Leave, awarded by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for Fall 2011.

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