

# Worsening Schisms in Thai Domestic Politics

**N. GANESAN**

*Professor of Southeast Asian Politics, Hiroshima Peace Institute, Japan  
ganesan@peace.hiroshima-cu.ac.jp*

## **Abstract**

The September 2006 military coup against the Thaksin government in Thailand has had a profound impact on Thai politics. It has arrested the process of democratic consolidation that was set in motion in the country in the 1990s. Although many of Thaksin's policies lacked the spirit of democratic governance, he was democratically elected and was ousted from power unconstitutionally. The entire tenure of Thaksin has brought to the fore two deep cleavages in Thailand. The first of these is the deep divide between the rural and urban electoral constituencies. The former provided a major vote bank with little bearing on the dispersion of power and resources that was effectively dominated by the latter. Thaksin and his populist policies effectively undermined the urban electorate and strengthened the rural constituency. The second and perhaps structurally more significant tension is that which has developed between the new business elite and the old establishment elite that comprise the monarchy, military, and the bureaucracy. This old elite has been at the forefront of displacing Thaksin through its fear of loss of control over the domestic political process. The drawn out confrontation that has spawned two social movements has significantly raised the country's political temperature and there is the real potential for the situation to deteriorate into violence. Despite these changes, a number of continuities unique to the Thai political situation continue to obtain as well.

## **Introduction**

In December 2007, Thailand held an election to vote in a new government after a national referendum had earlier ratified a new constitution. The elected government was meant to replace a caretaker military government that staged a coup against the country's elected Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, when he was away in New York attending an United Nations meeting in September 2006. Since then, however, the elected government has been reconstituted following the court decision to dissolve the People Power Party that had won the 2007 election. Since December 2008, Thailand has been governed by a minority coalition government led by the Democrat Party. In fact, it

was the defection of a major pro-Thaksin faction led by Newin Chidchob in parliament that allowed Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva to form the current government.

The 2006 military coup came as a surprise to many observers and academics working on Thailand for the simple reason that after the failed coup attempts in 1991 and 1992, it was assumed that Thailand had shed authoritarianism for good and was well on its way to becoming democratic. Prior to the coup, democracy allowed for the election of a self-styled populist leader. Thaksin, at the time when he was ousted from power, had successfully won two elections consecutively in 2001 and 2005. In the latter election, his *Thai Rak Thai* (Thai Love Thai – TRT) party controlled 377 out of the 500 seats in parliament and structurally at least his position was unassailable. However, his personality and policies, while endearing him to the new business elite and rural poor, deeply alienated traditional centres of power and the urban electorate that has always wielded disproportionate influence in determining national politics.

Theorists on democratic consolidation have always alerted us to the forward and backward movements between authoritarianism and democracy in the early stages of the onset of the latter. Pakistan and Nigeria are normally cited as the two countries prone to such developments. It was also assumed that democratic enfranchisement involved alienated segments of the population in the political process and accommodated them better structurally. This structural accommodation was meant to yield political stability and the conditions for social stability and economic growth. Yet, the very opposite outcome obtained in Thailand. This essay examines the Thaksin legacy, the 2006 military coup, and their collective impact on Thai political culture, especially as it pertains to worsening existing political schisms.<sup>1</sup> The first section examines the consolidation of democracy from 1988 to 2005, while the second looks at two major schisms in Thai domestic politics that have become significantly strengthened recently. The third then identifies continuities in the Thai political culture, notwithstanding the emergence of these major schisms. The fourth and final section then concludes the article.

### **Consolidation of democracy from 1988 to 2005**

The two schisms in Thai domestic politics that this paper addresses are by no means new. In fact, they have existed in the Thai landscape since the 1980s and

<sup>1</sup> The ‘political culture’ approach to the study of developing countries was in vogue in the 1960s. Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba are generally regarded as pioneers of the approach in the United States. The approach emphasized participatory norms and attitudes among citizens that in turn reflected the political system and interacted with it. However, by the 1970s, the literature in the field began to regard the cultural approach as both amorphous as well as reductionist and unscientific, emphasizing behavioural norms rather than scientific data that could be verified and disproved more readily. Nonetheless, the approach continues to offer poignant glimpses into cultures and peoples and may be regarded as part of what anthropologists like Clifford Geertz regard as ‘thick description’. For the seminal work on political culture see Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963).

have actually become exaggerated as a result of the entrenchment of democracy and its interaction with the changed political economy of the state that began at the same time. Anek Laothamatas, in his major contribution to Thai studies, has argued how the country's political economy was radically transformed in the 1980s away from the traditional bureaucratic polity as it was previously described by Fred Riggs.<sup>2</sup> Importantly, Anek also notes how this transformation in turn created a new business elite that circumvented the levers of power controlled by the earlier elite that comprised established business interests, the monarchy, the military, and the bureaucracy. The structural transformation of the economy in turn created the first schism between the new and old elite. Thaksin and his *Thai Rak Thai* party comprised many members of the new business elite, although the party also harnessed the power of provincial strongmen (*jaopho*) at the outset. The degradation of the Thai economy in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis in 1997 allowed Thaksin to appropriate a populist opportunity to power. His resource endowments that were totally disproportionate to those of his political competitors availed him of the necessary resources to succeed. Since Thai politics often revolve around personal loyalties that are cemented on the basis of patronage (*bunkun*), Thaksin was able to amass political capital and loyalty. As his popularity and power grew, the schism between the old and new elite grew correspondingly.

An extension of this first schism was the displacement of the military and the monarchy from the mainstream of Thai domestic politics. While wielding immense political power appropriated structurally and from patronage, Thaksin acted like a republican at heart. Whereas Thailand is only a constitutional monarchy, the current Thai King, Bhumiphol Adulyadej, has appropriated political power over the years through deft interventions at critical historical junctures. The Privy Council that advises the King is also drawn in part from retired military elite. Among these councilors, none is more powerful than Prem Tinsulanonda, Statesman and President of the Privy Council. It is understood as a matter of protocol that he is the purveyor of the King's designs and decisions. Given his previous appointments as army commander and Prime Minister, Prem's *barami* (political charisma) is unmatched in the country. This nebulous linkage between Prem and the King has recently been described as part of a networked monarchy that preserves and promotes royal interests.<sup>3</sup> This networked monarchy appears to have entered into a loose alliance with the military and has become contemptuous of civilian politicians. After all, in the past, every time the military staged a coup, it claimed to

<sup>2</sup> Anek Laothamatas, *Business Associations and the new Political Economy of Thailand: From Bureaucratic Polity to Liberal Corporatism* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> For an interesting article on the linkage between Prem and the monarchy see Duncan McCargo, 'Thaksin and the Resurgence of Violence in the Thai south: Network Monarchy Strikes Back?', *Critical Asian Studies*, 38 (1) (2006): 39–71. Also see his most recent piece on the situation in Thailand in 'Thai Politics as Reality TV', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 68 (1) (February 2009): 7–19. For a much more systematic appraisal of the monarchy's involvement in and management of the political process see Paul Handley, *The King Never Smiles: A Biography of Thailand's Bhumibol Adulyadej* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

be working in the national interest rather than the narrow corrupt interests of civilian politicians.<sup>4</sup> Thaksin's tenure brought this related schism to a new high as well and there has been nervousness since the December 2007 election that elements within the military sympathetic to the networked monarchy will prevent Thaksin proxies from wielding political power and, worse, facilitating his return to the country and into the political process again.

The second schism that the Thaksin administration exaggerated was that between the rural and urban constituencies. Although a gulf between these two constituencies had always existed, the populist policies of Thaksin brought it to the fore. His three-year moratorium on farm debt, million baht grant per village for cottage industry, loan of cows to farmers, and 30-baht fixed medical fee all endeared him to the poor. In this regard, Thaksin was one of the few politicians who harvested the rural vote for its structural worth of approximately a third of all seats in parliament and attempted to return the favour with policies favourable to the poor. In fact, both during the Thaksin administration and in the December 2007 national election, it is clear that this constituency continues to regard Thaksin very favourably. The *Palang Prachachon* (People Power Party), a reincarnation of the *Thai Rak Thai* led by Samak Sundaravej, won the highest percentage of the votes in the north and northeastern areas that had previously endeared themselves to Thaksin. In rewarding this constituency for its support, Thaksin hoped to utilize democratic norms to retain and enhance his power. Unfortunately though, as is true with most developing and developed countries, it is the urban electorate in Thailand that determines the political rules of the game. The steady process of democratic enfranchisement and participation in the 1990s had created an urban culture that was interested in moulding the course of the country's democratic development. Consequently, although Thaksin was repeatedly elected democratically, his personality and policies alienated the urban electorate.

In order to put these schisms in perspective, we will first look closer at the historical process of democratization in Thailand. Second, for parsimony, the schisms will then be dealt with in reverse order.

### **The democratic consolidation phase: 1988–2005**

Chatichai Choonhavan's election into office in August 1988 on the back of General Prem's premiership from 1980 to 1988 was revolutionary. Although Prem was an appointed rather than elected Prime Minister, he allowed political parties to function and gave the media much greater freedom and latitude – key ingredients for a

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, although Thaksin polled well for his popularity at the outset, by his second term, this popularity that derived from his populist policies in the rural areas had begun to wane. In fact, many of those polled were prepared for the return of a strongman rather than the continuation of democracy. For a feel of the pulse of the nation at the time of the coup and after see Satoru Mikami and Takashi Inoguchi, 'Legitimacy and Effectiveness in Thailand, 2003–2007: Perceived Quality of Governance', *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 8 (2008): 279–302.

functioning democracy.<sup>5</sup> He also had a generally conciliatory approach towards politics and stepped down from power in April 1988 in the face of a no confidence vote rather than stage a coup. For these reasons, Prem is often viewed as the midwife of democracy in Thailand, although more recent appraisals of him have been far less generous. Following his election, Chatichai's Indochina Initiative was equally revolutionary. By promising to turn the battlefields of Indochina into marketplaces, Chatichai effectively negated Thai perceptions of a Vietnamese security threat.<sup>6</sup> This perceived threat that conditioned previous Thai foreign policy output towards its immediate neighbours also allowed the military to play a dominant role in domestic decision-making. The so-called Indochina Security Complex allowed the military to appropriate significant legitimacy in the political and policy processes.<sup>7</sup> By denying the Vietnamese threat, Chatichai deprived the military of its legitimacy in both processes in one fell swoop. Subsequently, the policy formulation process was slowly brought under the control of the political executive, especially in the areas of domestic security and foreign policy. The military's discretionary 'secret budget' was axed and the automatic appointment of senior military officers to state enterprises was also rescinded. And finally and most importantly, the Speaker of Parliament was henceforth drawn from the elected Legislature rather than the appointed Senate that was typically filled with high ranking serving and retired military officers.

Chatichai's revolutionary tenure came to an abrupt end in 1991 when the military, led by General Suchinda Krapayoon, mounted a coup against the government. The military cited the existence of 'unusually rich' politicians, an euphemism for widespread corruption and claimed that its actions were in the interest of national security and development. Subsequently, a retired senior bureaucrat, Anand Panyarachun, was appointed by the military to lead a caretaker government for a year before elections were called in 1992. It is worth noting at this juncture that both the 1991 coup and the appointment of Anand were meant to deflect attempts at provincial dominance of parliament. In 1992, the military, led by Suchinda, attempted to control the political process through an unelected premiership supported by parliament and

<sup>5</sup> See Clark D. Neher, 'Semi-Successful Semi-Democracy', *Asian Survey*, 38 (2) (1988): 192–201. It should be noted however that there is considerable disagreement in the scholarly community whether semi-democracy constitutes a regime type. See William F. Case, 'Can the Halfway House Stand? Semi-Democracy and Elite Theory in Three Southeast Asian Countries', *Comparative Politics*, 28 (4) (1996): 437–465 and David Collier and Steven Levitsky, 'Democracy with Adjectives: Conceptual Innovation in Comparative Research', *World Politics*, 49 (3) (1997): 430–451.

<sup>6</sup> See Katharya Um, 'Thailand and the Dynamics of Economic and Security Complex in Mainland Southeast Asia', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 13 (3) (1991): 245–270.

<sup>7</sup> A Security Complex refers to a web of interactions between geographically proximate states that are relatively self-contained. Perceptions of external threat derive from such patterned interactions. The Indochina Security Complex groups the countries of mainland Southeast Asia into such a complex with Vietnam being the regional hegemon. See Barry Buzan, 'The Southeast Asian Security Complex', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 10 (1) (1988): 1–16 and Muthiah Alagappa, 'The Dynamics of International Security in Southeast Asia: Change and Continuity', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 45 (1) (1991): 17–21.

political parties, as was the case with Prem earlier, but was thwarted by widespread demonstrations against the military's return to power.<sup>8</sup> By this time, however, the norm of support from political parties for military strongmen had been clearly established. The charismatic leader of the *Palang Dharma* Party and ex-governor of the Bangkok Metropolitan Authority (BMA), Chamlong Srimuang, served as symbolic leader of the protest movement. The situation eventually culminated in political violence and led to the intervention of the King through Prem to appease both parties and withdraw from political contestation. Subsequently, King Bhumiphol appointed Anand Panyarachun to head a second caretaker government before elections were called in 1992. At the time of his appointment, Anand was also a businessman and held the chairmanship of the Federation of Thai Industries (FTI). An interesting detail to note with Anand's appointments was that he was acceptable to both the military and the monarchy, perhaps indicating a measure of convergence of interests.

Beginning from 1993, the Democrat Party led by Chuan Leekpai dominated Thai politics, although its hold on power was briefly broken by the Prime Ministership of Banharn Silpa-archa in 1995 and Chaovalit Yongchaiyudh in 1996. The Democrat Party, led by Chuan, who had a reputation as an honest and committed politician, was able to capitalize on popular sentiment in its favour from 1992. It aggressively pushed for a number of domestic political reforms that were aimed at weakening military involvement in the political process, reducing corruption and leakage of public funds and the introduction of transparent democratic principles of government. Additionally it was committed to and presided over constitutional reforms that eventually led to the laborious drafting of a totally new constitution in 1997 with wide-ranging societal inputs.<sup>9</sup> The reforms also included the administrative and fiscal decentralization of large urban centres like Chiangmai and Phuket.

The brief periods when the Democrat Party was not in control of the national agenda occurred in 1995 and 1996. The *Chart Thai*-led Banharn government was subjected to factional infighting and high levels of corruption, while Chaovalit, who led the New Aspiration Party (NAP) with significant support from the poor agricultural region of the northeast (*Isaan*), was also racked by these 'old-style' issues that distinguished the Democrats from the others. The onset of the Asian financial crisis in July 1997 dealt a mortal blow to the Chaovalit government, which was forced to resign and take some blame for its financial mismanagement that led to losses to the tune of US\$24 billion in the central bank's attempts to support the Thai baht against speculative attacks. The subsequent floatation and collapse of the baht considerably worsened the situation. This crisis provided Chuan with a unique window of opportunity to lead a reconstituted government after being approached by King Bhumiphol. Hence, the

<sup>8</sup> See Surin Maisrikrod, *Thailand's Two General Elections: Democracy Sustained* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> See Suchit Bunbongkarn, 'Thailand's Successful Reforms', *Journal of Democracy*, **10** (4) (1999): 54–68 and N. Ganesan, 'Appraising Democratic Developments in Post-Authoritarian States: Thailand and Indonesia' *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, **28** (1) (2001): 3–18.

Chuan Leekpai-led government that was defeated by Thaksin in 2001 did not have strong control over the legislature and was in effect a weak cobbling together of six political parties. In other words, it was a minority-led coalition government with a royal rather than popular mandate. The Chuan government, with its weak and sprawling coalitions, approximated the model that Prem had created in the 1980s.

The fallout on Thailand's economy from the Asian financial crisis in 1997 provided a major boost for Thaksin and the party that he formed in 1999, two years before the elections and the widespread appeal of a populist agenda. Central to the populist agenda were practical steps to achieve a measure of internal self-sufficiency (*mahajanaka*) that had been proposed by the King a few years earlier.<sup>10</sup> Key features of the scheme involved providing each village with a million baht and encouraging the output of cottage industries by identifying a single product for each village (OTOP – One *Tambon* One Product) and a three-year moratorium on farm debt. Public medical services were also made much more affordable at a flat rate of 30 baht per hospital visit. The introduction of these policies was well in line with the nationalist position of Thaksin's party, *Thai Rak Thai* (TRT).<sup>11</sup> Large numbers of urban dwellers who were displaced by the crisis were able to relate to the populist agenda and Thaksin had resources that were totally disproportionate to those of his competitors, many of whom were significantly weakened by the crisis.

Thaksin's success in persuading the Thai population to support his agenda received widespread endorsement: TRT's performance at the 2001 general election was nothing short of outstanding. With 248 seats, the party needed only three more seats for a clear majority in parliament. This was easily achieved on the basis of the party's new bargaining position, considering that its closest rival, the Democrat Party, had secured only 128 seats. Accordingly, Thaksin had little difficulty in persuading parties like Seritham, Chart Pattana, and the New Aspiration Party (NAP) to join it as part of a larger coalition that eventually yielded it a total of 350 seats and in commanding control of parliament. More importantly, TRT was able to persuade smaller parties like *Seritham* and NAP to disband and merge with it as part of a larger party. A similar initiative to draw on the strength of the *Chart Pattana*, a breakaway faction from the *Chart Thai* party, initially failed in November 2003 but was subsequently successful after its leader Suwat Litapanlop was able to secure a more attractive deal.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Paul Handley argues that the sufficiency economy was mooted only after the monarchy attempted to deflect the tremendous loss of prestige to itself and money to the Crown Property Bureau, whose holdings in Siam Commercial Bank and Siam Cement Company in particular were subjected to significant degradation and subsequent insolvency. Handley argues that the monarchy attempted to avoid the IMF reforms and replace the Chaovalit government with a 'national government' modeled along that of Prem in the 1980s. However, this attempt was thwarted before the rebuke of capitalism and invocation of the sufficiency economy. See Handley, *The King Never Smiles*, pp. 407–417.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Montesano, 'Thailand in 2001: Learning to Live with Thaksin', *Asian Survey*, 42 (1) (2002): 90–99.

<sup>12</sup> See James Ockey, 'Change and Continuity in the Thai Political Party System', *Asian Survey*, 43 (4) (2003): 663–680.

In the February 2005 general election, Thaksin was able to considerably widen his lead. The TRT surged ahead in its popularity and won a landslide victory in the election, securing a total of 377 seats in parliament. In fact, the victory margin was so large that opposition MPs did not have the required quorum to call for a censure motion in parliament.<sup>13</sup> Under those circumstances, Thaksin stopped wooing smaller political parties for support and foresaw little threat from the Democrats. In fact, the situation became so skewed in favour of TRT that opposition MPs, academics and social critics called on civil society groups to act as a buffer against Thaksin's overwhelming mandate and power.<sup>14</sup> The reason for the call was the general belief among many observers and analysts that Thaksin, while having acquired political power through democratic means, was not particularly enthused about the restraints that accompany democratic governance. There is in fact significant evidence to support such a charge. In other words, whereas Thaksin has generally abided by the rules of democratic contestation, his actions indicated an aversion to democratic norms and the diffusion of power.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, there is evidence to suggest that Thaksin consciously and consistently sought to enhance his own power, often to the detriment of democratic institutions and norms. Nonetheless, he was, beyond question, much loved by many in the poorer rural areas that benefited directly from the TRT's policies. In this regard, he was one of the few senior Thai politicians who indicated some commitment to lessening the plight of the poor rather than attending to a predominantly urban constituency. The ease with which Thaksin subverted democratic norms also seems to suggest that these norms were not well entrenched in Thailand through the 1990s, notwithstanding the Democrat Party's attempts to introduce structural changes and a new constitution into the political landscape.

In the aftermath of the 2006 coup, there have however been significant changes to both the political parties as well as the political system in general. In so far as political parties are concerned, the major change was the disbandment of the *Thai Rak Thai* and the five-year moratorium on its senior officials from holding public office. Three smaller political parties were also ordered to be dissolved by the Constitution Tribunal for violating the political party law.<sup>16</sup> Whereas the Democrat Party was absolved of the

<sup>13</sup> In the final tally, Thai Rak Thai secured 377 seats, the Democrat Party obtained 96 seats, Chart Thai 25 seats, and the new Mahachon Party gained only two votes in the 500-member parliament. In order to move a motion of censure, the opposition needs the support of 25% of parliament or 125 MPs out of a total of 500.

<sup>14</sup> 'Opposition takes battle to the EC: two more seats needed to launch censure bid', *Bangkok Post*, 11 February 2005; 'Civic groups plan government rally to keep campaign in check', *ibid.*, 9 March 2005 and 'Wider charter changes opposed', *ibid.*, 30 May 2005.

<sup>15</sup> See N. Ganesan, 'Appraising Democratic Consolidation in Thailand under Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai Government', *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, 7 (2) (2006): 153–174.

<sup>16</sup> The *Rak Paedin Thai* and *Thamma Thippathai* were dissolved for having failed to file a report of their activities in 2005, while the *Palang Dharma* Party was dissolved for having failed to provide receipts of the spending of its subsidy to the Election Commission. See 'Three small parties dissolved', *Nation*, 22 October 2007.



charges brought against it and therefore gained significantly from the dissolution of both the *Thai Rak Thai* and its successor, the People Power Party (PPP) later on, its fortunes remain ambivalent since the current Democrat-led minority government only came into being after the Newin Chidchob faction from *Thai Rak Thai* defected to join the Democrats in December 2008.

### **Party institutionalization and strengthened schisms in Thai politics**

Traditionally the military and the bureaucracy dominated politics and administration in Thailand. Within the traditional Thai concepts of King, Nation, and Country, there was quite simply no space for political parties. Resources and power were accumulated and distributed by 'non-democratic' elite groups. These were in turn often mediated as well as reinforced through kinship, social networks, and patron–client relations. After all, within the Thai conception of hierarchy and status, there was quite simply no place for political parties.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, political parties, when they existed in the early years, were often regarded as functional tools by the traditional elite. In this regard, early Thai political parties did not necessarily represent the will of the majority or even significant segments of society for that matter. To quote John Girling, early political parties existed between the hammer of military coups and the 'anvil of bureaucratic indifference or distaste'.<sup>18</sup>

In light of the structural and social constraints that obtained, early political parties were often conceptualized as government parties (*phak rathaban*). Alternatively, political parties served as vehicles for traditional elite already in power. In the early years, political parties survived under the direction of Pridhi Banomyong from 1944 to 1947 and subsequently under the direction of Colonel Phibun Songkram from 1948 to 1957. Thereafter, political parties were banned by Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat and until the late 1960s by Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn as well. Even when the ban was lifted, the *saha pracha Thai* (United People's Party) set up for the 1969 elections was led by leading military and police elite such as Thanom and General Praphat Charusatien and Pote Sarasin.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, it would be fair to note that even such parties had at least transitory social bases that were often located in the rural provinces. The bureaucratic polity of yesteryears quite simply sought to bureaucratize democratic practices to further its own interests. Exceptions to this rule occurred only in the 1970s after the 1973 Student Uprising and the Democrat Party led by *Mom Rajwong* Seni Pramroj effectively broke the bureaucratic mould. Nonetheless, the Pramroj brothers were themselves from royal backgrounds and part of the traditional elite. Similarly, the Chart Thai party also owes its origins to the military in 1974 and General Adireksan, General Chatichai Choonhavan, along with close relatives of General Pin were its founding members. Likewise, the Social Action Party (SAP) was founded in 1974 by *Mom Rajwong*

<sup>17</sup> See John Girling, *Thailand: Society and Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), pp. 157–158.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 160–161.

Kukrit Pramroj. Hence, it was the democratic interlude between 1973 and 1976 that was crucial to the formation of political parties in Thailand. By the 1970s, political parties and parliamentary procedure already existed in Thailand, notwithstanding decades of military authoritarian rule. Democratic practices characterized by a competitive party system were therefore a norm-in-waiting.

It is worth noting at this juncture that *Chart Thai* represented the unusual willingness of a military cabal implicated in a number of atrocities in the 1970s and before to engage in electoral politics and to do so even when it was not in government. The story of the institutionalization of the Thai party system during the 1980s and the 1990s is in many ways an extension of the *Chart Thai* model. During the Prem era from 1980 to 1988, while neither the premier nor many of his key ministers were elected MPs, parties were without question the principal legitimate open vehicles for contesting power in Thailand. Central to the *Chart Thai* model and to the institutionalization of the Thai party system was the combination of money politics and the reliance on provincial power-brokers or faction leaders.<sup>20</sup> Beginning in the 1990s, there was a mushrooming of political parties. The emergence of new political parties was a natural response to the evolving political situation. Following the precedent set by Prem and Arthit Kamlaeng-Ek before him, retired military commanders attempted to become Prime Ministers. However, the failure of the military's coup attempt in 1991 and attempt to wrest power in 1992 meant that new avenues for political legitimacy had to be found. In light of the ongoing democratic transition in the country, political parties became a legitimate way to aspire for and acquire power, albeit that such attempts were often rooted in the quest for spoils and in factionalism. Notwithstanding these selfish motivations, Thailand was pushed by the institutionalization of parties into increasing political openness, the institutionalization of parliament and elections whose outcomes had real meaning.

Thai political parties have traditionally waxed and waned depending on a number of circumstances. The first of these is the personality of the leader and the patronage arising from political power. Such patronage that was traditionally both a reason for and source of corruption, held party loyalists together. Patronage also meant that rural electoral constituencies could be created or bought through dispensations at the village or district level. The practice of buying and selling votes was and is naturally detrimental to democracy, but it is the reality in the rural areas in Thailand where poverty is endemic. This practice in turn created politicians who sought to recover their 'investments' as quickly as possible after an election in order to begin accumulating gains afterwards. These practices in turn created a fundamentally unstable party system that was skewed towards politicians serving their own interests rather than governing for the national good. A corollary development of this practice was that governments tended to be unstable and did not last their full terms in office. Factions within parties, alignments and realignments within parties, and self-serving coalitions further worsened matters.

<sup>20</sup> I owe this observation to a discussant memo from Michael Montesano while presenting a paper on political parties in Thailand in July 2006 in Singapore.

This manner of political mobilization strengthened an already existing rural–urban divide in the country. Politicians became adept at harnessing the rural vote in order to further their own interests in the urban areas. A correlated problem was that the educated urban middle classes detested this practice and sought to fashion the evolving political culture modeled on their own preferences and policies. Consequently, a structural socio-economic divide in the country was given political prominence and utilized for electoral purposes.

During his first term in parliament from 2001, Thaksin altered the dynamics of the political system in Thailand. While it was true that TRT had accumulated sufficient power so that it no longer worried about even censure motions in parliament, its overwhelming strength also became a source of fear among many observers. Consequently, there were more attempts to scrutinize the government than ever before. The Democrat Party did perform poorly partly owing to leadership problems and the absence of a clear agenda.<sup>21</sup> In all fairness, Thaksin cannot be blamed for the opposition's failures. The obvious reason for scrutiny nonetheless was that at the time of its formation, Thaksin incorporated many political groups that were led by provincial strongmen. Hence, the party suffered from a ramshackle quality on the ground. Consequently, even as the TRT strengthened in terms of the total number of electoral seats over time, cracks began to show. The irony of Thai political culture is that since it is so personality and patronage driven, loyalties are hard to keep and hold. As a result of these factors, even for someone of Thaksin's wealth and ability, absolute party discipline and loyalty could not be maintained. In fact, just a month after his landslide victory and reelection, factionalism within his party began to emerge. Veteran politician and leader of one of the factions, Sanoh Tienthong, publicly quarreled with Thaksin and threatened to break ranks with TRT.<sup>22</sup> Hence, although Thaksin intended to weaken the party system and amass power for TRT, Thai political culture was capable of frustrating his plans from the outset. Factionalism also indirectly prevented the rural–urban divide from taking centre stage since factions were often represented by provincial strongmen

<sup>21</sup> Banyat Bantadtan who led the Democrat Party in the 2005 election did not have the same level of support as Chuan Leekpai. His resignation immediately after the election results were announced left the party in limbo before Abhisit Vejjajiva was elected to lead the party. At 44 years of age, Abhisit is generally regarded as young and inexperienced. See 'Banyat, Sanan call it quits', *Bangkok Post*, 8 February 2005 and 'Abhisit steps in as acting party leader', *Nation*, 21 February 2005.

<sup>22</sup> 'Thai Talk: The weaker the opposition, the more defiant the factions', *Nation*, 24 March 2005; 'Another TRT faction sets up panel to spy on ministers', *Bangkok Post*, 25 March 2005; 'Factional spat: Thaksin shrugs off Snoh's new politics centre', *Nation*, 31 March 2005; 'Factional anger boils as Thaksin refuses to go to Sanoh's birthday bash', *Bangkok Post*, 31 March 2005; 'TRT feud reaches new heights', *Nation*, 1 April 2005; 'Factions go after Sudarat in tit-for-tat', *Bangkok Post*, 1 April 2005; 'Tot TRT position: faction to "rock" party if Suriya is dumped', *Nation*, 13 April 2005; 'Split over Auditor General: TRT rocked by rebellion', *Nation*, 26 May 2005; 'Thaksin's bad day in parliament: expel me, Snoh dares PM', *ibid.*, 9 June 2005 and 'Sanoh in open rebellion', *Bangkok Post*, 9 June 2005. Previously, Somsak Thepsuthin headed the Wang Nam Yom faction with 100 MPs, Snoh Tienthong headed the Wang Nam Yen faction with about 40 MPs, Thaksin's sister Yaowapa Wongsawat headed the Wang Bua Ban faction, and Sudarat Keyuraphan headed the faction comprising some 30 MPs from Bangkok.

who lobbied for their constituencies. Thaksin's populist policies also helped to bridge this structural divide, though it was to the chagrin of the influential urban electorate.

Strong factionalism has however been a traditional feature of Thai politics, even among large and powerful parties. And notwithstanding the ability and resources available to parties and their leaders, factionalism is a mainstay of the party system. In fact, factionalism is one of the major reasons why Thai political parties suffer from a low rate of institutionalization. Factionalism is also tied to resource allocation and clientelism. The latter is an endemic feature of the Thai political system. Even Thaksin Shinawatra, for all the resources available to him, had to deal with four major factions in his party. Thaksin tried to control factionalism by promulgating a law, in line with the 1997 constitution, that would require electoral candidates to have held membership in a political party for a minimum of 90 days before being able to run for elections. The strongest criticism of the new rule actually came from within Thaksin's own party. Sanoh Thienthong not only criticized the move that would have jeopardized his own role as a factional leader, but also would have prevented politicians from switching loyalties across parties at the last minute – a fairly common practice in Thai politics. In this instance, factional loyalty was clearly more important than loyalty to the party with the overwhelming majority. After all, factions, like minority parties in fragile coalition governments, are able to exert greater or disproportionate influence than their actual worth.

These trends are however indicative of more serious problems within the party system. Such problems include the overwhelming influence of dominant personalities within these parties that tie their MPs and constituents to them on the basis of personal loyalty and patronage (*bunkun*). Chart Thai's Banharn Silpa-Archa and Thai Rak Thai factional leader Sanoh Thienthong are classic examples of such personalities. Politicians with charismatic personalities and stature (*barami*) are not only able to hold loyalties, but also prevent factionalism. However, their departure from the scene typically triggers a political crisis that in turn affects the party's performance. The Democrat Party certainly suffered in the polls after the exit of Chuan Leekpai and his successor, 44 year old Abhisit Vejjajiva, continues to be viewed as young and relatively inexperienced.

The outbreak of widespread protests against the Thaksin government was certainly not expected a year after its overwhelming victory. However, the schism between his power accumulated from the rural vote and his style and policies that alienated the urban constituency were beginning to manifest itself. A number of charges leveled against him led some disgruntled constituencies to coalesce and unseat him. These elements that both led and represented the urban constituency, included elements from the mass media led by Sondhi Limthongkul, the Santi Asoke sect and its Dhamma Army led by Chamlong Srimuang, academics and students, public employee unions, and generally disgruntled members of the middle class.<sup>23</sup> In the lead up to the protests,

<sup>23</sup> 'Members of 42 state enterprise labour groups may strike' and 'Forming a united front', *Nation*, 7 March 2006 and 'Labour unions move against Thaksin', *Bangkok Post*, 7 March 2006.

there were widespread allegations of corruption and attempts to muzzle the media. Especially significant were charges that the national development agenda had been skewed in order for Thaksin to reward members of his party. This alleged change came to be referred to as ‘policy corruption’.<sup>24</sup> However, the proverbial straw that broke the camel’s back was the sale of Shin Corp shares held by him and members of his family to the Singapore government investment firm Temasek Holdings. The deal which netted the family US\$1.8 billion drew angry protests since no taxes were paid for the transaction.<sup>25</sup> Subsequently, Thaksin’s son was charged by the regulatory and exchange commission and fined the equivalent of US\$150,000. The sale of the shares that included telecommunication satellites and related services tested bilateral relations between Singapore and Thailand.

The situation was fluid and rather than succumbing to the pressures as most Thai politicians would have done in order to restore calm and prevent the situation from deteriorating, Thaksin held on to power and remained defiant. Although he had in the past alluded to his willingness to step down if the King ‘whispers in his ears’ – an euphemism for the withdrawal of royal support – publicly he maintained that his mandate was democratically obtained and legitimate. Consequently, as he put it, democracy should not be subverted by the protests against him and projected himself as the champion of democracy. Eventually, Thaksin claimed to have won some 57% of the popular vote and based on his earlier assertion of a renewed mandate if he obtained more than half of all votes cast, he reclaimed the Prime Ministership shortly after the April 2006 election. The returns however indicated diminished support for Thai Rak Thai, a large number of anti-government and spoilt votes, as well as a number of constituencies without any candidates. Eventually, the Election Commission called for by-elections in 39 uncontested constituencies on 23 April 2006. In the middle of all these developments, the street protests continued. Finally, on the night of 4 April, two days after the election, Thaksin announced a leave of absence as Prime Minister after an audience with the King. Presumably, he was eventually whispered to. In announcing his resignation, as a face-saving gesture, Thaksin noted that he was stepping down in the interest of national unity and to assist in the national celebration of King Bhumiphol’s 60th Anniversary celebrations that were merely two months away. Once again, intervention by the monarchy resolved the political impasse and returned the political process to a modicum of normalcy, albeit, as noted earlier, this royal intervention was a deft way of ensuring the return to palace-centred politics and dealing with the second schism between popularly elected Thaksin and the networked monarchy.

That minority Thai urban voter sentiments overcame those of the rural majority should come as no surprise to political scientists. Such patterns of elite selection and

<sup>24</sup> See ‘Jaruvan slams government graft practices’, *Bangkok Post*, 14 March 2006. The term ‘policy corruption’ is now commonly used by academics and researchers to refer to Thaksin’s development plans and priorities, in particular large infrastructure projects.

<sup>25</sup> ‘Eyebrows raised as Shin deal wins tax shelters, rule waivers’, *Nation*, 25 January 2006.

endorsement are common in developing countries. In fact, the governments of the two recent Prime Ministers with strong rural support – Banharn Silpa-archa and Chaovalit Yongchaiyudh – should have served as a reminder to Thaksin that strong rural support alone is insufficient to remain in power. For all the drama that was played out in the weeks leading up to Thaksin's dissolution of parliament and the call for fresh elections, the most sobering reminder of the Thai political situation is that the urban and educated middle class that defeated the coup attempts in 1991 and 1992 remains strong and sufficiently motivated to mobilize and defeat an incumbent government perceived as unworthy of its mandate to rule. Many leading public intellectuals and social critics were equally convinced that Thaksin was unworthy of support and sought to undermine him. In this regard, perhaps the urban middle class is unprepared for a popularly elected leader who does not fulfill their expectations in some way or acquires sufficient power to decrease or mitigate their input into the national political process.

The dissonance between the sheer power of the rural voter bank and the converse clout of the urban middle class is a serious source of tension in Thai politics. Traditionally, politicians who harnessed the power of the North and Northeastern periphery, did little more than pay voters and engage in some rural development work in exchange for electoral support. The village headmen (*phuyaiban*) and district officers (*kamnan*) often served as intermediaries in the process of harnessing this vote bank.<sup>26</sup> Traditional godfathers (*jaopho*) were equally adept in organizing and delivering bloc votes. Interestingly, the institution that bridged this wide chasm between the power of the rural electorate and the influence of the urban electorate was the monarchy. It is in the rural areas where the King is much loved for his experimentation with high-yielding and pest-resistant agricultural crops. The King has also commissioned many rural projects to provide much needed irrigation to this farm belt. It is also here that the image of the King has been best preserved as God-King and saviour of the masses. In light of these developments, an interesting speculation is whether Thaksin, by endearing himself to the rural poor, had undercut the seemingly benevolent influence of the monarchy. And if he had indeed done that, the crime would certainly be regarded unpardonable in a country where the ground the King walks on is literally sought after and worshipped.

The Thai King's intervention to resolve the dispute between the PAD and Thaksin led to the latter's subsequent resignation as Prime Minister and the temporary installation of a caretaker government. The second major schism between the networked monarchy representing the old elite and Thaksin representing the new had been resolved in favour of the old. However, after a short interregnum, Thaksin returned to resume his normal duties. The greater impact on the political party system was the King's directive for the courts to resolve the political deadlock. This development subsequently led to the Constitution Court annulling the 23 April by-election and by extension the

<sup>26</sup> On the importance of village leaders and elders, see Michael Moerman, 'A Thai Village Headman as a Synaptic Leader', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 28 (3) (May 1969): 535–549.

earlier general election as well. In order for parliament to be filled and function, the Election Commission initially announced the 15 October 2006 as the new date for a general election, but it was not to be after Thaksin was ousted in a military coup. Subsequently, at the King's behest for the courts to adjudicate and resolve the political crisis that the country was facing, two further dates were set, one on the 23 November and the second on the 23 December.<sup>27</sup> The second date was eventually upheld as the most feasible one in light of all the necessary administrative preparations and the recalibration of the political party system. The decision of the courts to disband the *Thai Rak Thai* and ban some 110 senior politicians from the party from politics for a five-year term effectively neutralized the reemergence of the *Thai Rak Thai*, at least as it was previously constituted.<sup>28</sup> A year later, in December 2008, the courts disbanded the *Palang Prachachorn* (People Power Party – PPP) that had culled together Thaksin loyalists. Through the bureaucracy, the monarchy had thrice denied Thaksin a place in Thai politics.

The legitimacy the *Thai Rak Thai* government, obtained before the coup, was already seriously undermined by the boycott policy of the major opposition parties. In addition, the Election Commission also disqualified a large number of candidates standing for the April elections. And, finally, the large number of anti-government and spoilt votes worsened the situation. To complicate matters even more, during a speech delivered on 29 June, Thaksin implicated an 'extra-constitutional and charismatic' figure in trying to unseat him from power. Most observers regard this comment as a reference to either General Prem, the current President of the Privy Council that advises the King and disseminates his wishes, or to the King himself. The Thai King is regarded as being above the political process and the Thai Constitution allows for *lese majeste* charges to be brought against those who defame the King or the royal family. Anti-Thaksin and *Thai Rak Thai* protestors clearly tried to implicate Thaksin for defaming the King on the basis of his remarks regarding the extra-constitutional forces at work to topple him.

The King's intervention in mediating the situation was certainly interpreted as a slap in the face for Thaksin. He subsequently endorsed the government led by Surayud Cholanont who acted as caretaker premier after the coup.<sup>29</sup> It may be remembered that Surayud is also a member of the Privy Council that advises the King. In light of the nebulous linkages between retired members of the military and the monarchy, it does appear as if the two institutions have a measure of overlapping interests. Ironically, although Thaksin managed a clear statistical majority of votes, he was eventually forced to relinquish power undemocratically. However, the outcome was to have been expected

<sup>27</sup> 'October 22 poll proposal deemed illegitimate', *Bangkok Post*, 17 May 2006 and 'Election fiasco: last EC members told to quit', *Nation*, 17 May 2006; 'Govt, EC confirm poll on Dec 23', *Bangkok Post*, 5 October 2007 and 'Cabinet approves Dec 23 election', *Nation*, 17 October 2007.

<sup>28</sup> See 'Constitutional Tribunal disbands Thai Rak Thai', *Nation*, 31 May 2007 and 'Wednesday night massacre' and 'Tribunal acquits democrats of all charges', *Bangkok Post*, 31 May 2007.

<sup>29</sup> 'HM backs Surayud government', *Nation*, 5 December 2006.

since the protesters were increasing progressively in number, and key Thaksin allies from the police, military and business community indicated their unease with the situation of stalemate that existed.<sup>30</sup> The socio-economic cost simply became too burdensome for everyone even in the face of Thaksin's willingness to accept no obstacle as a given. Thaksin had clearly violated the unwritten rules of Thai political culture, including an attempt to dismantle the post-1957 palace-centred political network – a legacy of the military strongman Sarit Thanarat.

In the aftermath of the 2006 coup, there have been a number of important structural changes introduced into the Thai political system that have the potential to impact profoundly on the system. These changes also significantly enhance the power of the old elite. The first of these changes is the significant reemergence of the military in domestic politics, after having been relatively dormant in the last 15 years. The clearest sign of this new role was the appointment of retired military elite such as Surayud and Sondhi to executive appointments in government. Subsequently, the temporary 242-member National Legislative Assembly (NLA) that was appointed as the interim government included many members of the military closely associated with Prem.<sup>31</sup>

Another sign of such reemergence is the formation of the Council for National Security (CNS) that drew on senior members of the military. Since its formation, the CNS effectively justified the military coup against Thaksin by releasing a 35-page White Paper entitled 'Facts about the Reform of Thai Politics on September 19, 2006' explaining the circumstances surrounding, and the motivations for, the coup. The document 'outlines corruption scandals, abuse of power and conflicts of interest in the Thaksin government'.<sup>32</sup> The CNS also transferred provincial governors who were seen as being close to *Thai Rak Thai* or administering states where the *Thai Rak Thai* maintained a strong constituency. Additionally, the CNS appointed military officers to be deputy governors in all 76 provinces and extended the terms of village headmen from five to ten years.<sup>33</sup> Then, as a final precaution, military commanders of key battalions in the north and northeast deemed a potential threat to the existing political situation were replaced.<sup>34</sup> These measures are meant to undercut the support base of the *Thai Rak Thai*, especially in the north and northeast of the country where Thaksin's populist policies gained the party strong electoral support. In the rural areas, the military government has also scrapped the 'one million cows project' under whose terms the Thaksin government announced a plan to lend out cows to rural farmers to supplement

<sup>30</sup> 'Old money strikes back like a blast from the past', *Nation*, 15 December 2006.

<sup>31</sup> Prem associates in the NLA include Vice Admiral Pachun Thampratheep, General Panthep Phuwartnarak, General Pairoj Panitsamai, General Oud Buangbon, Admiral Prajet Siridej, Admiral Prasert Boonsong, and General Preecha Rojsen. See 'New Parliament: NLA "doesn't represent" all of the people', *Nation*, 13 October 2006.

<sup>32</sup> 'CNS makes its case for the coup', *Nation*, 22 November 2006.

<sup>33</sup> 'TRT-linked governors transferred', *Bangkok post*, 1 November 2006 and 'CNS moves to tighten army's grip', *ibid.*, 2 March 2007.

<sup>34</sup> 'Army chief tightens his grip: transfers to counter PPP's rise in popularity', *Bangkok Post*, 16 November 2007.



their income.<sup>35</sup> This project, together with the three-year moratorium on farm debt and the highly subsidized universal medical care endeared Thaksin to the rural poor. In order to undercut such populist appeals, the military has also announced a scheme to educate the rural poor on how to vote.<sup>36</sup>

As for the political party system, the dissolution of the *Thai Rak Thai* led to a large number of new parties being formed. Many of these new parties are derived from factions representing the *Thai Rak Thai*. The largest of these, the *Palang Prachachon* (People Power Party – PPP) was led by the well-known ex-Governor of Bangkok and unabashed supporter of Thaksin, Samak Sundaravej. From his list of close associates and advisers, it was clear that he was the nominee for core factions of the *Thai Rak Thai*.<sup>37</sup> In an interesting twist to this major metamorphosis of the *Thai Rak Thai*, PPP officials cited examples of intimidation by the military and an alleged secret military plot to destroy the party – a plot confirmed by the junta appointed caretaker Surayud Cholanont.<sup>38</sup> In light of such accusations and their verification, it is evident that the military clearly regarded the PPP with contempt and certainly as a Thaksin appointed/inspired party. And to add fuel to fire, it was announced that video compact discs of Thaksin campaigning for votes in the rural Northeast of the country for the PPP had been discovered.<sup>39</sup> Technically, this development alone could have scuttled the PPP's attempts to secure a victory or form the government. Thaksin, while calling on rural voters to elect the PPP also mooted the idea of a national coalition government to ameliorate political tensions.<sup>40</sup> In this regard, it is arguable that contrary to his previous assertions, Thaksin was determined to influence the political process in Thailand, even in absentia. Presumably, the intention of such involvement was to stage an eventual return to direct involvement in national politics. These behind-the-scene maneuverings significantly raised the political temperature in the country as well as the ire of the military and presumably the monarchy as well. Consequently, the present political situation with pro- and anti-Thaksin forces clearly pitted against each other certainly augurs the potential for the outbreak of violence. The failed recent assassination attempt on the leader of the anti-Thaksin People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) is indicative of the levels of pent up anger.

Another significant development is that newly formed political parties have attempted to woo the military. In the past, especially in the 1980s and early 1990s, this practice was common. The clearest way of establishing some sort of compact with the military was to engage senior retired military officers. Over time, as the party system

<sup>35</sup> 'Ministry scraps one-million-cows project', *Bangkok Post*, 29 November 2006.

<sup>36</sup> 'Interior ministry to educate rural people on how to vote', *Nation*, 29 November 2006.

<sup>37</sup> The factional leaders behind Samak include Sudarat Keyuraphan, Yaowapa Wongsawad, and Thaksin's spokesperson Surapong Suebwonglee. See 'Samak set to head up TRT bloc', *Nation*, 1 August 2007.

<sup>38</sup> 'See 'PPP boasts it will capture 250 house seats', *Nation*, 30 October 2007; 'PPP alleges soldiers intimidate its canvassers', *ibid.*, 29 October 2007 and 'Top-secret plan to ruin PPP revealed', *ibid.*, 26 October 2007.

<sup>39</sup> See 'PPP Faces dissolution over videos of Thaksin', *Nation*, 10 December 2007.

<sup>40</sup> 'Hard talk: Thaksin's "National Unity" plan bitterly ironic', *Nation*, 11 December 2007.

evolved and became entrenched, the military, or at least senior retired officers, opted to form their own parties in order to assuage public anxiety. There appears to have been a reversion to this old tactic, at least in the case of the newly formed parties. So, for example, retired army commander General Chetta Thanajaro was elected to head the *Ruam Jai Thai Chart Pattana* Party.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, the *Matchimathippathai* Party considered inviting serving General Saprang Kalayanamitr to join its ranks after his retirement.<sup>42</sup> And it was reported that the *Puea Pandin* Party invited General Chaovalit Yongchaiyudh to advise the party on its campaign strategy for the Northeastern region.<sup>43</sup> It may be remembered that Thaksin skillfully utilized Chaovalit's New Aspiration Party (NAP) to tap on this large voter bank before merging the party with TRT. The PPP that appeared to be independent and almost contemptuous of the military was dissolved. Both the Democrat Party and *Chart Thai* have also avoided any clear alliance with the military.

These early signs point to the classic attempt by the new Thai political parties to adjust to the emerging power equation. There are attempts not to antagonize the military while it is in power, and some attempts for it to exercise power after the election as well. After all, if the military could stage a coup against Thaksin who had overwhelming odds in his favour, it certainly can displace lesser contenders. Veteran political observers think that the current situation in Thailand can be interpreted in a number of ways. Prominent academic Chai-Anan Samudavanija thinks that the parties will learn how to work with a resurgent military, leading to a weakening of democracy, although the nature of the relationship will be informal. The same process, he argues, will lead to an empowerment of the bureaucracy and technocrats, members of the old elite.<sup>44</sup> Another academic and Thaksin critic, Pasuk Phongpaichit, thinks that Thaksin succeeded in deeply politicizing and polarizing Thai society by empowering the rural electorate and thereby alienating the traditional elite and the urban middle class.<sup>45</sup> A related development to the strengthening of the military in the political process is that it also empowers the monarchy and reinforces the symbiotic relationship between the two institutions. The Privy Council not only houses members of the military, but senior 'royalist bureaucrats' who had previously been sidelined by Thaksin.<sup>46</sup>

To the extent that the King brokered the deadlock between Thaksin and the PAD, the situation was constitutionally managed. Yet, it may well be argued that public demonstrations, despite being an expression of fundamental liberties, has exerted undue influence on democratic structures and undermined the process of

<sup>41</sup> 'Chetta to lead Ruam Jai Thai Chart Pattana', *Bangkok Post*, 16 October 2007 and 'Ruam Jai Thai Chart Pattana elect Chettha as leader', *Nation*, 16 October 2007.

<sup>42</sup> 'Prachai eyeing Saprang to join Matchima', *Bangkok Post*, 16 October 2007.

<sup>43</sup> 'Chavalit predicts political calm after polls', *Bangkok Post*, 15 November 2007.

<sup>44</sup> 'Thailand's future: military will keep "pulling the strings"', *Nation*, 16 February 2007.

<sup>45</sup> 'Thai politics beyond 2006 coup', *Bangkok Post*, 31 July 2007.

<sup>46</sup> In 2001, when Thaksin sidelined Kasem Watanachai and Palakorn Suwannarat, within hours, they were appointed by the King to the Privy Council. See Shawn W. Crispin, 'Thailand: all the King's men', *Asia Times*, 22 September 2006.

democratic consolidation. The popularity of demonstrations and the ability of loose organizational coherence within the Thai left at critical junctures in the country's political evolution may also be interpreted as a consequence of the failure of the left at democratic institutionalization. The coup against an elected government, no matter how unpopular, has clearly set back the process of democratic consolidation. After all, a coup merely indicates that the military has the power to deprive public officials of their duly constituted office. Such behaviour is naturally deleterious to the party system as well. Public protests do have a place in democracy, but they should not become so unwieldy as to threaten or dislocate the democratic process. Such behaviour threatens political stability and state–society relations, undermining the autonomy of the state. Typically, in mature democracies, public officials who regard themselves as having lost the political mandate in the legislature or at the popular level tend to resign from office so that a new government more representative of the public will may be constituted. Hence, whereas public trust is an important measure of party institutionalization, such trust should be channeled through due process. Both the pro- and anti-Thaksin forces are guilty of such excesses and the present attempts by both parties to involve the monarchy in bringing Thaksin's legacy to a close is simply a continuation of the process. The National United Front of Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD or Red Shirts) is keen to harness Thaksin's popularity to obtain a royal pardon for him, while the PAD (Yellow Shirts) is attempting to scuttle this attempt by collecting signatures against such an initiative. And in the middle of this drama, the traditional elite is trying to 'educate' the public on the terms and conditions that warrant a royal pardon.

### **Continuities in Thai politics**

Notwithstanding the structural changes to the Thai political system and political culture, it is arguable that a considerable number of continuities obtain as well. The first and perhaps most obvious of such continuities is the intervention of the King at the height of the political crisis between the PAD and Thaksin. As noted earlier, such intervention has a long history, beginning with involvement in the Student Uprising in 1973 and persuading the military junta in power to step down. Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn even went into political exile and subsequently returned as a monk. Another intervention in favour of General Prem in 1981 deflected an almost successful coup attempt led by Manoon Rupakachon of the Young Turk faction within the military. Afterwards, when brokering the peace between Major General Chamlong Srimuang of the austere Santi Asoke sect and General Suchinda Krapayoon in 1992, it was the King that rang the death bell for the military's active role in politics, or so it appeared then. Subsequently, it was also the King who appointed Anand Panyarachun for a second term in office as interim Prime Minister. And, finally, it may be remembered that in 1997, following the loss of confidence in General Chaovalit after the onset of the Asian financial crisis, it was the King who called on Chuan Leekpai from the Democrat Party to form the minority coalition government that was in turn defeated by Thaksin in

2001. Therefore, a case can clearly be made that the King's 'whisper' to Thaksin to step down and his subsequent endorsement of the coup and its nominees for power is well within the norms of Thai political culture.

What is perhaps a little more difficult to ascertain is whether the King's intervention and the seeming confluence of interests between the King and Prem as President of the Privy Council is indicative of a networked monarchy as interpreted by Duncan McCargo. The Privy Council exists to advise the King and Prem, given his previous credentials and appointments is closely associated with the military. There is little question of him not having significant input into military matters and post-coup developments. Consequently, it would be fair to surmise that both the King and Prem have interlinked interests. There is also much common cause against Thaksin and his attempts to alter the ground rules of traditional Thai political culture and displace the previously existing elite. If the King is truly the unmoved mover, then Sarit Thanarat's attempt to invoke the monarchy to legitimize military authoritarian rule in the 1950s and 1960s has clearly backfired, or has at least been compromised. The exalted status of the King and *lese majeste* laws have allowed for the monarch's name to be invoked in vain against political opponents. Sondhi Limthongkul appropriated this very powerful condensation symbol in Thai politics very early on.<sup>47</sup> With visible displays of yellow garb that harken to the monarchy, Sondhi utilized powerful symbols skillfully. The fact that the King turned 80 in 2007 provided added aura to the monarchy. In fact, the situation became so ironical that when Thaksin attempted to return to power after being 'whispered' to by the King, he invoked the monarchy and stressed the overwhelming national importance of the King's birthday celebrations in order to stay in office. Similarly, Thaksin supporters in the UDD are currently trying to lobby for a royal pardon for Thaksin. Hence, it would be fair to say that the King's name is often invoked in vain by all and sundry, including political opportunists.

The second major continuity is the importance of dominant personalities with the requisite *barami* for political leadership and party formation. With few exceptions, the Thai political landscape has generally been receptive to new and remoulded political parties. The reason for this development is that political parties are viewed as vehicles for power and patronage rather than governance. As a result of this trend, it is not uncommon for political leaders to look after their own constituencies and client MPs. Consequently, leaders of factions gravitated between parties and parties often housed opposing factions. It was the promise of power and plenty that brought such factions together. This practice has in turn had a deleterious effect on party formation and the political system as a whole. It has also often led to unwieldy and large coalition governments that easily become undone. Curiously enough, during the tenure of the Prem government in the 1980s, this negative quality of the political parties was rendered irrelevant through a pork-policy compact between Prem and the technocracy whereby

<sup>47</sup> For an elaboration of condensation symbols, see Murray Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985).

the latter exclusively managed macroeconomic policy without hindrance. Although the arrangement was undemocratic, as Allen Hicken argues, the practice allowed for better implementation of public policies.<sup>48</sup> This previous practice was disbanded by the Chatichai government that was subsequently elected into office after Prem in 1988 with all the attendant consequences. The present Abhisit-led minority coalition government is subjected to all the weaknesses described earlier. Loyalties will certainly be much more difficult to earn and keep when the political situation becomes fluid and the coalition may well unravel over time. The shifting allegiances and alliances point to the fact that no positions are permanent in Thai politics.

Whereas the leadership of the Democrat Party and *Chart Thai* and *Chart Pattana* have remained the same, all new political parties are led by faction leaders from the TRT. The exception, Samak Sundaravej, was a well known politician and television personality. His own political party, *Prachakorn Thai*, had never managed more than a few seats in the past and the PPP offered him much better prospects of wielding real power, although it did not last very long. PAD-led protests and occupation of Government House made governance exceptionally trying. However, it was a minor charge of having accepted some \$260 for a cooking programme aired on television that led to his eventual removal by court order. His replacement, Somchai Wongsawat, suffered a similar fate when the PPP was disbanded. An interesting twist to Samak's leadership of the PPP is that he comes from a family line of royal pages and claimed to be a steadfast supporter of the monarchy.<sup>49</sup> In fact, in contrast, Prem has significantly more humble background with little previous linkage to the royal family. Perhaps the choice of Samak was an astute attempt by Thaksin to deflect charges that the PPP was fundamentally opposed to the monarchy. After all, Thaksin did allude to extra-constitutional forces that removed him from power.

Another two important continuities are the dominating influence of the rural voter bank in parliamentary seat allocations and the equal if not greater dominance of urban voter sentiments. These seemingly irreconcilable pulls have always informed Thai politics and the strategic choices of politicians and parties alike. Chaovalit Yongchaiyudh and Banharn Silpa-archa provide living testimony to the importance of the rural voter bank. At the present time, it is estimated that whoever controls the rural Northeast will be able to deliver up to a third of all the seats in parliament. It was this bank that propped up Thaksin and it was this bank that delivered on his populist policies. At the present time, it is also exactly this bank that the military is wary of since its leanings towards Thaksin are clear. Yet, ironically, it is the educated urban elite in large cities like Chiangmai and, in particular, in Bangkok that have determined political choices and outcomes. This pervasive feature of Thai politics has been in evidence since the 1970s but was especially critical in transforming the country's political culture in the 1980s

<sup>48</sup> See Allen Hicken, 'The Politics of Economic Reform in Thailand: Crisis and Compromise', Working Paper No. 638, William Davidson Institute, Ann Arbor, MI, 2004, pp. 11–17.

<sup>49</sup> Shawn W. Crispin, 'The Thai military's democratic nightmare', *Asia Times*, 30 November 2007.

and 1990s away from military authoritarian rule. Yet, ironically again, it was this class that seemingly rejoiced in the coup that ousted Thaksin from power. Perhaps, urban voter sentiment in Thailand is fickle, as Machiavelli described fortune in *The Prince*.

### Conclusion

Thai politics has metamorphosed considerably since the 1980s when democratic practices first etched themselves on to the Thai landscape. It then underwent a process of adjusting to some non-democratic constraints in the 1980s under the Prem government. However, Prem's relatively liberal attitude, the weakened political role of the military, and socio-economic and developmental changes that enlarged and empowered the middle class set the stage for democratic norms to take root in the 1990s. The failed coup attempt and the implementation of political and administrative changes to consolidate democratic gains led to the consolidation of democracy in the 1990s. However, the Asian financial crisis of 1997 weakened both the Democrat Party and the reforms that it undertook to institutionalize democratic norms. The difficulties and sense of gloom following the crisis allowed Thaksin's *Thai Rak Thai* party to win a near majority of seats in parliament in 2001 and an overwhelming majority of seats in 2005 – both feats in themselves by Thai political standards. Yet, Thaksin's popularity at the polls that was at least partly obtained from a populist agenda waned significantly a year into the second term. There were widespread accusations of corruption and the sale of his entire share of Shin corporation shares without having paid any taxes allowed the civic and political opposition to draw common cause in opposing his continuation in office barely a year after his second electoral victory.

The *Thai Rak Thai's* reconstitution as the PPP was subjected to severe harassment by the PAD and was eventually dissolved by court order. The current Democrat-led government's legitimacy is controversial since it was the defection of a major TRT faction that allowed it to obtain a parliamentary majority. In any event, developments since 2001 in Thailand have brought a number of simmering tensions in Thai politics to the fore. In fact, some of them have become major schisms. The first of these is the one that pits the traditional elite, including the monarchy, military, and the bureaucracy against the new economic elite that Thaksin represented.<sup>50</sup> A related schism between the monarchy and the military on the one hand and civilian politicians on the other is correlated to the first schism. This lesser schism has actually emerged as a consequence of the first and is an attempt at reassertion by a networked monarchy. The second major schism is that between the rural and urban constituencies. Thaksin successfully harnessed the rural vote bank like politicians before him, but also sought to remain structurally embedded through populist policies. This attempt to alter the rules of

<sup>50</sup> A recently published article draws the conclusion that the 1997 constitution that allowed for enhanced executive power was as much responsible for Thaksin's success as the Asian financial crisis. See Kitti Prasirtsuk, 'From Political Reform and Economic Crisis to Coup d'etat in Thailand: The Twists and Turns of the Political Economy, 1997 – 2006', *Asian Survey*, 47 (6) (November/December 2007): 872–893.

the game led to deep urban dissatisfaction with Thaksin and was a significant factor leading to his eventual removal from power. The 2006 military coup demonstrates that democratic norms in Thailand can still be thwarted and remoulded to accommodate traditional interests and elites. Nonetheless, the coup itself represents a culmination of the exacerbated schisms that the Thaksin administration had worsened.

Curiously enough, the same urban electorate that was staunchly opposed to the military coups in 1991 and 1992 ended up welcoming the 2006 coup instead. The reason for this endorsement appears to be the seeming excesses of the Thaksin government. The coup has in turn returned both the monarchy and the military to political centre stage. These developments have negatively impacted on democratic consolidation in Thailand. Through its linkages to the military via the Privy Council and General Prem, the monarchy has also empowered itself in the process, reminiscent of the compact achieved by the military authoritarian Sarit government that was in power from 1958 to 1963.

The coup and its aftermath have also led to the dissolution of the *Thai Rak Thai* and its successor, the People Power Party. The splintering of the *Thai Rak Thai* has weakened the political party system. Additionally, many of the new parties have sought the patronage of retired senior members of the military. The King's decision to let the courts arbitrate the outcome of the political crisis has also strengthened the judiciary and the bureaucracy. Whereas such arbitration is well in line with democratic norms, the military coup against the elected government is certainly a setback for democracy as were the demonstrations spawned by the PAD that had the very real possibility of deteriorating into violence. This development is not unlike the 2000 People Power movement in the Philippines that ousted President Erap Estrada and replaced him with Gloria Arroyo. Such extra-constitutional developments are deleterious to the entrenchment of democracy in Southeast Asia. In this regard, on hindsight, Indonesia appears to have made the best structural progress in what Samuel Huntington described as 'The Third Wave of Democracy' after the downfall of the Suharto government in 1998. Notwithstanding the negative impact of Thaksin and the military coup on Thai democratic culture, there are also a number of latent continuities in the post-coup period.

### **About the author**

Dr N. Ganesan is Professor of Southeast Asian Politics at the Hiroshima Peace Institute in Japan where he has been since 2004. His research interests are in sources of tension at the intrastate and interstate levels in Southeast Asia. Prior to his present appointment, he was Senior Lecturer in political science and Southeast Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore from 1990 to 2003.