

ARTICLE COMMENTARY ROUNDTABLE

Erik Martinez Kuhonta

ROUNDTABLE ON TERI L. CARAWAY'S
“DE-THAKSINIZING THAILAND: THE LIMITS
OF INSTITUTIONAL DESIGN”

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Teri Caraway's very insightful paper asks us to re-think the extent to which institutions played a significant role in the electoral victories of Thaksin Shinawatra and his Thai Rak Thai Party (and their subsequent incarnations). Arguing against the so-called “institutionalists,” Caraway argues that constitutional and electoral rules did not matter in generating TRT's victory, but rather had temporal and nuanced effects. First, they mattered in terms of the magnitude of TRT's 2001 electoral win but did not explain the electoral results in and of themselves. Second, institutions helped consolidate TRT's power and were crucial in enabling the party to successfully implement its programmatic platform and therefore solidify a very loyal mass base. But once a mass base became consolidated in support of TRT, institutional engineering was subsequently less effective in shaping electoral outcomes. What Caraway most crucially shows is that one has to break down the causal effect of institutions temporally and draw a distinction between their role in a founding (and “unsettled”) moment, and then as mechanisms of reproduction.

Caraway adds to the study of Thai politics not just a critique of how institutions are employed as causal factors, but more importantly, how timing matters in assessing political events. By separating a founding moment from a period of reproduction, Caraway distinguishes in a sophisticated manner when and how institutions matter.¹ By showing how a focus on temporality leads to different conclusions about institutional effects, Caraway's intervention therefore points to an analytical domain—temporality and more generally, historical analysis—that is ripe for more work within the institutionalist literature on Thai politics. In lauding Caraway for her nuanced view of when and how institutions matter, I want to argue that this nuanced approach should have been sustained throughout her analysis, and if it had been, we might have a different interpretation of the causal factors at work in the founding moment.

To what extent did financial resources trump institutions and their subsequent effect on a programmatic platform in the 2001 elections? Caraway claims that financial resources alone were sufficient for TRT's victory. Thai parties have historically won elections thanks to clientelist politics, and therefore we cannot assume that voters would believe

In this roundtable, Kuhonta, Hicken, and Selway consider Caraway's “De-Thaksinizing Thailand: The Limits of Institutional Design” offering up defenses of institutionalist approaches to the rise of Thai Rak Thai. Caraway responds.

a new party advancing programmatic policies. Promises of short-term benefits would have led them to vote for TRT. As Caraway writes: “Since programmatic appeals were an unproven commodity in Thailand’s electoral political economy, both candidates in the constituency seats and voters had reason to be skeptical of their value.” Furthermore, the extent of gains at the constituency level alone would have ensured a parliamentary victory—and therefore the party-list itself, that incentivizes programmatic policies, was not crucial to TRT’s triumph.

Caraway then runs through a counterfactual that in the absence of finances, TRT would not have attracted so many local candidates (and therefore also voters) to its stable, while in the absence of programmatic policies, it would have. The more complex reality is that it probably was a combination of financial resources *and* programmatic policies that led to TRT’s attractiveness and eventual spectacular victory. Caraway is completely right to pinpoint the context of the Asian financial crisis as the structural foundation upon which TRT’s resource advantage played itself out.

Yet the impact of the financial crisis was not just about the relative advantage of Thaksin’s resources versus his opponents, but also about shaping the key issues that would matter in an election. Thaksin played brilliantly on the sense among a wide swath of the electorate that Thailand had been unfairly treated by the IMF and therefore by its domestic henchmen, the Democrat Party, which was at the helm of the government during the crisis and very eager to implement neoliberal reforms. Therefore, the programmatic agenda that TRT advanced, with social and economic reform at its core, was a direct response to the threats of neoliberal globalization. In a context where many firms were laying off hundreds of thousands of Thais, policies such as a universal health care or a massive loan program (1 Million Baht Village Fund) were attractive for struggling middle-class families and voters angered by neoliberalism.²

Thus, Caraway correctly identifies the Asian financial crisis as central to the resource imbalance that led to TRT’s runaway victory. But she underplays how the crisis actually helped set up TRT’s reformist vision, increased its resonance among politicians considering which party to join and ultimately, affected electorate. After all, in the context of the financial crisis, it was not accidental that TRT chose as its slogan “*khit mai, tham mai*” (think new, act new). Clearly, this slogan effectively encapsulated the reformist platform the party advertised so successfully.

Firmly distinguishing whether financial resources or institutions and programs mattered more is quite complicated, especially since, as Caraway herself notes, TRT had both greater resources and programmatic policies. It is already a significant contribution to show that institutions mattered at different times with different magnitude. A more nuanced approach would, in fact, allow that in the context of the financial crisis, reformed institutions conjoined with reformist policies must have had a significant effect, along with the resource advantages that a tycoon like Thaksin possessed at that time. Institutions, institutional reforms, and institutional effects must then be understood and embedded within larger structural, historical, and temporal conditions.

Erik Martínez Kuhonta is Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at McGill University. He is author of *The Institutional Imperative: The Politics of Equitable Development in Southeast Asia* (Stanford University Press, 2011), which was short-listed for the Canadian Political Science Association Prize in

Comparative Politics. He is co-editor of *Party System Institutionalization in Asia: Democracies, Autocracies, and the Shadow of the Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) and *Southeast Asia in Political Science: Theory, Region, and Qualitative Analysis* (Stanford University Press, 2008).

NOTES

1. By contrast, within Southeast Asian Studies, the literature on Philippine politics is notable for significant research that takes temporality very seriously. See, for e.g., Anderson 1996; Sidel 1999; Hutchcroft 2000. For a review of the relationship between comparative-historical analysis and Southeast Asian Studies, see Kuhonta 2014.

2. 800,000 individuals were laid off during the financial crisis. See ESCAP 2002–2003.

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Allen Hicken

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I commend Teri Caraway for a careful and useful critical analysis of the rise and success of Thaksin and his Thai Rak Thai party. The move to separate the origins of TRT and its subsequent consolidation is an important one—the factors that contributed to the first may not be the same as those that enabled the second. I also appreciate that Caraway's explanation gives due credit to Thaksin's resources and the way in which those resources enabled him to gain control of local political machines and power his party to victory. I agree with her assessment as to the importance of those resources. I also agree with her assessment that political institutions were crucial to the consolidation of Thaksin's power and the greater institutionalization of TRT. We disagree on two points: first, whether Thaksin's resources are a sufficient explanation for TRT's victory in 2001; second, the inferences we draw from the failure of the 2007 reforms to re-fragment the party system in the way the military junta had hoped.

On the first point, Caraway argues that Thaksin's resources were sufficient to explain his victory, and that the role of institutions was merely supplementary: Institutional reforms contributed to the scale of TRT's victory, but were not strictly necessary.