

## **THE POST-COUP POLITICS IN THAILAND: THE RE-EMERGENCE OF BUREAUCRATIC GOVERNANCE AND ITS CHALLENGES**

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Surin Maisrikrod

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In my view, there is no way that we can discuss the post-coup politics in Thailand meaningfully without discussing what came before the coup – namely the five years of Thaksin government. Of course, many observers have discussed the Thaksin government extensively in different fora around the world, and one of the things they noted was the extra-ordinariness of the Thaksin government. Some commentators then commented that Thaksin's approach was very “un-Thai”.

### **POLITICAL ANOMALIES SHAPING THE THAI POLITY, 2001 – 2006**

I am going to tentatively redefine this uniqueness of Thaksin government as a series of “political anomalies” – the sorts of things that were historically specific and will unlikely to be repeated ever again in Thailand – although I recognise the fact that talking about anomalies about Thai politics is always problematic and may invite strong disagreement. Although I am not sure the term, “anomaly” is the right one, I am using it here as a way of thinking through some of the issues that are not clear in my mind, given the complexities or nuances of what has become known as the “Thaksin Regime” – an appellation that was not accorded lightly. I hope to be able to develop some the ideas I am presenting today further. Obviously, I need to draw on more literature on Thai politics.

The Thaksin government was not a norm – and the coup itself should also be viewed as a political anomaly.

My argument is that these political anomalies presided over by Thaksin Shinawatra and the subsequent backlash against him have re-shaped the Thai polity – the relationship between the state, civil society and capitalism – in a profound way. One important implication is that there is now a re-emergence of bureaucratic governance – dominant in Thailand until some 15 years or so ago – that revolves around a new political coalition among conservative political forces led by bureaucrats, the judiciary and the military.

And I believe that it is a reinterpretation of Thaksin government's actions as political anomalies – rather than as political continuities – that is integral to our understanding of the post-coup politics in Thailand.

#### ANOMALY 1: “KNIGHT ON A WHITE HORSE”

One should not doubt Thaksin's populist policies and formidable party organisation, but what counted most in the landslide electoral victory of Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai in January 2001 was the wave of nationalism following the collapse of the Thai currency and economy in 1997. The IMF-coordinated rescue plan which allowed foreign multinationals to buy up assets in Thailand as part of the rescue plan led to a great sense of xenophobia among Thais – the feeling that the country was being sold to foreign/western countries or corporations. The Democrat Party, under Chuan Leekpai, who took over as prime minister in November 1997 following the collapse, was perceived as the party which “sold” the country to foreign capitalists by cooperating with the IMF and other foreign agencies.

Thaksin took full advantage of the public sentiment and projected himself as “a knight on a white horse” to salvage Thailand from foreign takeover. His popularity soared overnight, with wide-ranging support from the conservative bureaucracy, middle classes, intelligentsia, businesses, NGOs and civil society groups, and the media. His Thai Rak Thai (Thais Love Thais), formed in 1998, grew by leaps and bounds. In fact, the TRT was a form of alliance among the new domestic capitalist class, managerial/middle

classes, small- business entrepreneurs, new politicians, and technocrats, with close links to the military and the national police force.

A new political language was brought onto the political scene in Thailand during Thaksin's government. The TRT's "think new, act new" was not just a slogan; it brought a sense of new political dynamics and atmosphere. At least at the early stage of his prime ministership, he instilled a new confidence in people, particularly a strong sense of entrepreneurship. People actually believed that they would be better off economically with Thaksin in charge. His plan to spend huge sums of money as part of his populist policy, and his promotion of consumerism, not only in urban but also in rural areas, cemented the "get rich quick" rhetoric. And when money seemed to come more easily through the micro-credit scheme and other easy loans, there was a real sense of economic improvement among the people.

In short, Thaksin's ascendance was propelled by an enhanced confidence in the direction of the country among the people. So Thaksin did represent a "great new hope". The sort of hopelessness before the emergence of Thaksin was such that the Thais were ready to listen to anyone who could provide them with a clear direction, strong political leadership, and a kind of government that would not "sell" the country. These were historically specific circumstances that contributed to the uniqueness of Thaksin of government.

## ANOMALY 2: THE (RE-)POLITICIZATION OF THE RURAL AREAS

Rural voters were more or less taken for granted before Thaksin's arrival on the political scene. The dominant view was that the rural voters were politically passive: they were treated with contempt by politicians, and the way to garner their votes was to "buy" them. Policy platforms to help rural people were more of rhetoric than substance.

Thaksin has changed rural politics in a profound way. If not quite an entirely new politicization, then it was certainly a case of repoliticization of

the rural areas – a new kind of politics that Thaksin instilled. Thaksin saw rural voters differently. Not only did he seek to win votes in the rural areas, he also wanted to transform those areas by incorporating them into the national markets and instil in their people a new way of thinking. He believed that, if given enough resources or capital, they could build for themselves a considerable level of wealth. He created a sense of hope for the rural people, especially in the economic sense. It was a kind of “you-can-get-rich-too” rhetoric. He promised that “there will be no more poor people left” while he was Prime Minister.

Thaksin’s populist policies – particularly the micro-credit scheme – through which the rural dwellers did benefit materially, awakened the rural people to the idea that politics after all was about their daily living – “Democracy can be eaten”, as some have said.

Thaksin was also radical in reaching the rural folks. He did not distribute the goods through the traditional bureaucratic channels, but directly to people in the rural areas. This undermined bureaucratic networks while privileging political networks under the auspices of his Thai Rak Thai Party and associated business entities. From an economic point of view, Thaksin’s scheme to help the rural poor was a way to incorporate the rural areas into one national market – and in fact, the global market. From a political point of view, the rural people became the crucial source of Thaksin’s political support—based not as much on democratic participation as an ideology of consumerism. The rural giants have awakened and it is unimaginable that these already politically mobilized – or remobilised – people will ever be the same again. The battle to win the rural hearts will thus be even fiercer and will shape future Thai politics.

The attention given to rural voters was not accidental. It was conceived by Thaksin’s key supporters who were members or allies of the defunct Communist Party of Thailand, whose main activities in the 1960s and 1970s were to mobilise the rural areas to fight the Thai state. The communists were most active in the Northeast or Isaan, the very region where Thaksin’s

Thai Rak Thai was most influential. This was not a coincidence. And the Thai Rak Thai's strong base in rural Isaan explained why PM Surayud Chulanont visited the area not long after the coup, following news about Isaan people organizing opposition against his government and the military leaders.

### ANOMALY 3: THAI RAK THAI WAS NOT A POLITICAL PARTY

A closer look at Thai Rak Thai Party would reveal that the party is not an ordinary political party, but a cult-like political movement, where belief in the leader was irrational, where the leader was followed unconditionally, and where party activities were organised on the basis of populist, nationalist, and chauvinistic sentiment.

A number of powerful forces converge on the Thai Rak Thai Party. Thaksin's previous personal and professional experience enabled him to galvanise this formidable political alliance. First, he had undertaken one of the most, elite educational routes. Thaksin attended the Military Academies Preparatory School, from which graduates go on to join one of the four key forces — the army, air force, navy, or police. He thus has friends in the four services. Then, his doctoral degree from an American university — and people called him Doctor — placed him as part of the intelligentsia. Further success as a billionaire made him an enviable member of the business elite. Until then, these qualities existed in separate persons. Wealthy entrepreneurs tended to be uneducated ethnic Chinese immigrants, while aristocrats with higher education degrees were known to be uninterested in the then lowly world of business. Modern Thai politics during the 1970s and 1980s was characterised in a significant way by a combination of forces between these two groups of people — the politics-shy Chinese-Thai providing money for the well-educated politically savvy Thais to enter politics to help protect the former's business interests. But these elements converged in Thaksin, making him the perfect leader.

## ANOLMALY 4: THAKSIN WAS NOT A DEMOCRAT, BUT AN ELECTED AUTOCRAT

By his own admission, Thaksin was not a democrat; he was a paternalistic and authoritarian leader of a Lee Kuan Yew type. Cases of abuse of power, cronyism, and intimidation against political opponents were rampant. Political commentators described Thaksin's rule by several names, including Thaksinomics, Thaksinocracy, and Thaksinocrony. Generally, it was known as the "Thaksin Regime". Thaksin paid little attention to the values and goals of the 1997 Constitution which aimed to achieve a stronger democracy and robust system to keep government accountable, transparent and honest.

Despite riding on the democratic wave, Thaksin revealed that he was not interested in promoting democracy. As he said, "democracy is just a tool, not our goal."<sup>1</sup> What he wanted was instead "still" (quiet) politics. He wanted a kind of politics that would not be burdened by a strong system of checks and balances, or other counterbalancing forces in the substantive sense – like freedom of the press, human rights protection, or a strong Opposition. For Thaksin, "still politics" would allow him to implement his policies without parliamentary or media scrutiny. This "still politics" contributed enormously to his cronyism and rampant corruption.

The political alliance that Thaksin galvanized and the subsequent parliamentary dominance represented a major political power shift in Thailand, made more threatening to other political forces by his arrogance, intolerance of criticism, sharp-tongue, endless political manoeuvrings and abuses of power, which included:

- *Strengthening one-party rule.* This was done through mergers and acquisition of small parties into his Thai Rak Thai Party, despite his TRT's overwhelming majority in the Parliament. In this way Thaksin collected a total of 377 of the 500 seats in the Lower House (2005 elections), making it impossible for the Opposition to

move a no-confidence motion against him, since the Constitution required a minimum of 200 votes to do that.

- *Using political power to strengthen his business interests and expand his support base in the business community.* Before entering politics Thaksin built his formidable business empire through telecommunications concessions he received from the state. Having state power himself therefore guaranteed his long-term business expansion. He talked about staying as Prime Minister for 8 years and his party being in power for at least 20 years. The Thaksin government was very slow in setting up, as required by the 1997 Constitution, the National Broadcasting and Telecommunication Commission, which would have regulated the allocation of frequencies and other telecommunications operations and might have gone against his business interests. In the later part of 2003, the government decided – through an Emergency Decree, not by an Act of Parliament – to change the arrangement between the state telecom agencies and private concessionaire from concession fees to excise tax. Excise tax was fixed at a particular rate whereas concession fees would be determined by the rate of profits. The arrangement benefited Thaksin’s mobile phone companies. At the same time, Thaksin marginalized the economic agencies – dominated by technocrats and traditionally very influential policymakers since the 1960s – in particular the Bank of Thailand and the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB).
- *Promoting and co-opting security agencies.* Thaksin’s emphasis on political order and stability was at the expense of civil liberty and rights. Stability was expected to facilitate business growth and economic development. Political opposition – either from the Opposition in the Parliament or from civil society – was often branded as unconstructive and “unpatriotic.” This was where attempts to create order got in the way of public accountability – for example, the case of the government campaign against drug

trafficking in the early part of 2003, which led to extra-judicial killings of some 2,500 suspects. Thaksin brushed aside protests from the country's National Human Rights Commission as well as from international human rights organisations. This emphasis on order and stability strengthened the hands of repressive state apparatuses, particularly the police. At the same time, Thaksin appointed his relatives or close friends to powerful positions in the security establishments, including the Army and the National Police.

- *Seeking to influence the accountability institutions, including the Constitutional Court, the Elections Commission, and the Senate.* Somkiat Onwimon, one of the Senators critical of Thaksin said, "The parliament is weak. The House of Representatives is under the control of political parties. The Senate is very fragmented. In fact, the government increasingly encroached on the Senate. It is clear that the number of Senators who vote in favour of government keeps increasing between 50 and 80 (out of 200), especially when the government is determined to pass a bill which is favourable to the telecommunications businesses (owned by Thaksin and his cronies)".<sup>2</sup>
- *Taming the media and marginalizing civil society forces.* Through the use of advertising money from his and his cronies' businesses and through the huge PR budgets allocated to various ministries, he was able to win over the media to the side of the government. Self-censorship in the print media became quite common. Thaksin also used government-controlled television and radio stations to support his rule, and the only private TV station (iTV) which he had purchased prior to becoming PM. NGOs were belittled, ridiculed, intimidated and sued for criticizing government.

Indeed, Thaksin was practicing "democratic exceptionalism".

## ANOMALY 5: THAKSIN'S IMAGE AS A FORMIDABLE CHALLENGER TO THE TRADITIONALIST INSTITUTIONS AND FORCES

Thaksin was surrounded and influenced by the people who were known in the past for despising traditional institutions and showing contempt of parliamentary politics. These people, known commonly as the “Octoberists” (the student activists during the uprising that toppled the military regime on October 14, 1973), are driven by a strong desire to help the poor and the marginalised. More importantly, these people possess exceptional political skills, given their leadership role in one of the most momentous events in Thailand's political history. And it is fair to say that these people are power-seeking.

The bulk of the “Octoberists” who became Thaksin's close associates and political advisors joined with the defunct Communist Party of Thailand, which for years fought the Thai state in the jungle to topple the Thai state and its key institutions, including the monarchy. In fact, these people denounced western-based democracy. They were instead advocating a communist system.

It was these “Octoberists” who provided Thaksin with many imaginative and progressive policy ideas that captured the hearts and minds of voters. These people devised winning political strategies for Thaksin, and forged for Thaksin a close link with NGOs and other grassroots groups in the country side – at least at the beginning. These policies included the “one-million-baht-one-village” micro-credit scheme, a debt moratorium for small farmers, and 30-baht universal health care. In short, the “Octoberists” played a pivotal role in Thaksin's rise to power.

At the same time, Thaksin had some formidable business groups behind him. For example, seven large corporate empires, which accounted for about 20 per cent of all the share values in the Thai stock market in 2002, dominated Thaksin's government.<sup>3</sup> Predictably, it was this Thaksin-led

coalition that captured the electoral politics and mustered parliamentary dominance via his populist policies.

Thaksin's near absolute power was a new political phenomenon. Thaksin was establishing a long-term political hegemony. But it was this political dominance that was at the same time perceived as a threat to all other existing institutions in the country, including the monarchy.

#### ANOMALY 6: THE CHANGED MEANING OF ELECTIONS

The two landslide electoral victories of Thaksin changed the meaning of electoral politics and process in Thailand. (He would have achieved a third victory in 2006, but for the election being ruled invalid.) With an absolute parliamentary majority, TRT was seen as a political threat – a threat to key institutions, social classes and groups. With his pronouncement of using democracy as a tool, it was understood that Thaksin treated elections as a means to obtain power. It was widely perceived that Thaksin treated his electoral victories as a blank check for him to do whatever he liked. Liberal democrats and civil society in general were disillusioned that they could no longer rely on elections for meaningful democratic development, particularly in terms of strengthening an accountability system. The more Thaksin strongly insisted on his political legitimacy on the basis of his electoral victories – “16 million people voted for me” – the more the liberal democrats reacted. To the latter, Thaksin had effectively devalued the electoral process. For them, elections were meaningless. Elections became known as “two-second” democracy where things ended once one cast one's vote.

#### ANOMALY 7: POLITICAL POLARIZATION

Arguably, Thaksin presided over the most divisive Thailand in the country's political history. He was a kind of “winner-takes-all” person. This was the way he built his business empire. Thaksin's attitude seemed to be in line with an idea that “either you are with me or you are with my enemy”. He did not see the merits in a robust political contest. He did not seem to want to

allow a reasonable space for political contestation. And one of Thaksin's political tactics in this regard was to pit the rural people against the urbanites, taking advantage understandably of his immense popularity in the rural areas.

Thaksin used police power extensively to deal with political opponents. Journalists who opposed him had their bank accounts frozen and checked.

He dismissed academics as out-of-date in their ideas. He demeaned opposition parties as "old-fashioned".

#### ANOMALY 8: RAMPANT CORRUPTION

It was widely claimed and understood that the Thaksin government was the most corrupt government in Thai political history, although a statement like this is problematic given the different historical juncture in which Thaksin operated. The 13 corruption cases against Thaksin and his wife under the investigation of the Assets Examination Committee since the coup involve a sum of more than 300 billion baht (\$10 billion). This is phenomenal, even in the current level of economic development of Thailand, when the national income has grown many fold over the past four decades. More significantly, this alleged corruption involved what was known as "policy corruption" – where it occurred under the pretext of implementing a government policy – such as a privatization policy that led to Thaksin's people taking over government assets.

#### ANOMALY 9: THAKSIN WAS PERCEIVED (BY MANY) AS DISLOYAL TO THE MONARCH

This was probably the most damaging anomaly which played a decisive part in his downfall. There were a number of incidents that were construed as Thaksin taking on the Monarch. First of all, while the King has been advocating the "sufficiency economy" idea, Thaksin promoted what was

viewed as “extreme form of capitalism” (*tun ni yom sud dong*). In the Thai context, this was already considered a show of disrespect for the Monarch. The tension between the Monarch and Thaksin was confirmed by the King’s Birthday Speech on 4<sup>th</sup> December 2005, when he reprimanded the PM, albeit in a veiled way. The fact that Thaksin did not heed the King’s sufficiency economy idea was among the King’s criticisms of the PM. Another was the King’s reservation about Thaksin’s heavy-handedness in dealing with the latter’s political opponents. This included suing them for defamation (demanding huge sums of compensation) and distributing CDs to “explain” government policies. The King actually said by over-doing the explaining, the public had become “bored” with government.

Regardless of Thaksin’s intention, he was perceived by the public as showing disrespect for the King. There was no doubt in the minds of the middle-class people, bureaucrats and more importantly the military. The majority of the military took this matter more seriously than most and it quickly sharpened the conflict between the PM and the majority of the military establishment. The tension between Thaksin and the anti-Thaksin clique in the military precipitated their struggle for control of the armed forces, particularly the army.

Thaksin upped the ante by lining up his former classmates from the Armed Forces Preparatory School and relatives to take up key positions in the armed forces: his former classmate in the army to take over as Commander-in-Chief, the husband of his wife’s secretary as commander of the air force, and his brother-in-law in a key position in the Navy (presumably on his way to become the Navy commander-in-chief). In the police force, he made his brother-in-law deputy national police chief, in line for the post of the national police chief. But as Thaksin moved to promote his close associates, this triggered increased opposition from within the forces. His most formidable foe was none other than the army’s commander-in-chief, General Sonthi Boonyaratklin, and Thaksin could not act soon enough to remove the General.

Thaksin would have used the annual reshuffle of the armed forces on 30 September 06 to remove his foes and promote his friends in the armed forces in particular in the Army. General Sonthi was well aware of this, which partly explained why the coup had to take place on 19 September 06.

The military who see themselves as the guardians for the Monarchy decided that Thaksin had to go – sooner. This proved to be the most decisive factor in the downfall of Thaksin.

## **POST-COUP POLITICAL CONUNDRUMS**

Of all these political anomalies, the most serious one was the fact that Thaksin was widely viewed as a threat to traditional institutions – bureaucracy, the military, judiciary, aristocracy, and the monarchy. Many people say this was a unique coup: unique because past coups were at least ostensibly to prevent or suppress communist threats – the sort of people who had not been in control of state institutions. Therefore the Thaksin threat was more menacing in a way since he was already in control of state institutions and instruments and was using them to serve his interests. The belief was that Thaksin would use his power to do anything, including actions that could undermine the status and prestige of the Monarchy. And the military held this view most strongly.

So, post-coup politics is for the large part about attempts to: 1) eradicate the Thaksin Regime – including his Thai Rak Thai Party and other political machinery of the deposed Prime Minister, and; 2) prevent the rise of a government similar to that of Thaksin. Both efforts are spearheaded by conservative/bureaucratic forces, particularly the judiciary and the military – a kind of alliance that in itself a political anomaly.

How this politics is conducted characterises the current post-coup political landscape in Thailand, the sort of politics that clearly indicates the return of bureaucratic governance:

## **1) The Constitution.**

The new Constitution that is being drafted at the moment is for the large part an attempt to rectify the wrong-doing committed by Thaksin. While the rhetoric surrounding the drafting of the previous constitution of 1997 was how to best establish democratic institutions, the rhetoric for the current Constitution focuses more on ways to prevent another Thaksin-like government.

First, the Constitutional Drafting Committee – and the Constitutional Drafting Assembly – are dominated by technocrats who see Thaksin as an “elected dictator”. Second, various proposed provisions in the Constitution indicate strongly the rise of bureaucratic governance. These include:

- Government decrees to be scrutinized by the Constitutional Court, with the decree only allowed when it is absolutely necessary. (This is to counter balance politicians with judiciary bureaucrats).
- A state agency/unit to scrutinize or prevent the government from unscrupulous spending that could cause economic problems. Government must also justify its expenditure plans. (Again, this is clearly an attempt by career bureaucrats to have more say in the economic management of the country vis-à-vis the power of the “capitalist-cum-politicians”).
- Courts of law, and constitutional bodies to make submissions directly to parliament on budget allocations for their departments. (This is to prevent a government from using the budget as leverage against these accountability agencies).
- Guaranteed independence from government for the Office of the Public Prosecution.

- To prevent a care-taker government from using its power to influence state officials – for example by transferring them – in order to benefit the government. (The Thaksin government did this to gain electoral advantage).
- Outlawing MPs and Senators attempting to influence or interfere in the duties and responsibilities of career officials to make them serve particular vested political interests.
- Asset declaration cases against politicians to be under the jurisdiction of the Supreme (High) Court. (This is an assertion of judiciary bureaucrats).

Furthermore, another set of key provisions in the new charter aim to “prevent a monopoly of state power and abuses of power by government”, which is to be achieved via:

- empowering the people to be active participants in political processes, not passive political actors as in the past. (This is because it was believed that people in the rural area in particular were “manipulated” by politicians without being well-informed of what actually going on).
- outlawing an amalgamation of political parties during a parliamentary session. (Thaksin merged small parties with TRT during parliamentary sessions).
- allowing more freedom for MPs so that they do not have to be under strict party control. They would not be required to vote along party lines in a no-confidence vote. Moreover, only a quarter of MPs are required to submit a no-confidence motion against the Prime Minister. (During the Thaksin years under the 1997 Constitution, the requirement for this was 40 percent.)
- limiting a PM’s office to two four-year terms. (Thaksin was talking about staying on for 12 years).
- selecting Senators based on provincial and occupational quotas.

- tightening provisions preventing conflict of interest. (Thaksin was known for using his political power to give business benefits to his family members).
- constitutional bodies such as the National Counter Corruption Commission, National Election Commission, the Constitutional Court are to be selected by a selection committee that excludes representatives of political parties).
- giving more power to local governments (Thaksin undermined the power of local governments).

## **2) Neutralizing Thaksin and Thai Rak Thai Party.**

The second major attempt to eradicate the Thaksin regime is to annihilate Thaksin and the Thai Rak Thai Party. The Constitutional Tribunal's ruling on 30 May to ban TRT and its 111 Executives from holding political offices for 5 years was the first big step to achieve this. This will have a devastating impact on the party and will do a lot to prevent Thaksin and his colleagues from becoming a potent political force again.

So far, the public has viewed the Tribunal's verdict positively. The stock market responded well. The detailed verdict including clear evidence on which it was based convinced the public in general and the majority of the media that TRT was in the wrong. The most damaging evidence was the hiring by the TRT of small nominee parties to run in the April 2006 election to circumvent the electoral rule that in an uncontested constituency, a candidate must garner support from at least 20% of the electorate.

In the Thai context, once you are proved to have committed a wrong-doing, it is much harder to drum up public support. This is the difficulty that TRT is now in – at least among the urbanites and members of the middle class.

Without Thaksin, Thai Rak Thai will be weakened considerably. None in the party – with a new banner – will be able to galvanize support the way that Thaksin could. So, a resurgence of TRT under a new banner depends on

Thaksin's return to Thailand and exoneration from all charges, and that can most likely be done through a legislative means such as an amnesty law. But that is possible only if TRT Mark II and its alliance do well in the next elections to command a majority in the new parliament. So, they are kind of caught in this catch-22 situation.

This was one big step in neutralizing Thaksin. The next step will be to bring him to court, and possibly jail him. But a complete annihilation of Thaksin is possible only if the Thai Rak Thai is no longer allowed to be a potent political force. And this is what the military, police, bureaucracy and judiciary are doing.

### **3) A new political alliance led by the Democrat Party.**

Elections will have to take place before the end of the year as promised by the military. A renege on the promise will only bring stronger political opposition and, possibly, political turmoil and instability in Thailand. But it will be an election that will see an emergence of a coalition government, with, quite certainly, the Democrat Party leading the pact. Joining them will probably be Chart Thai, Mahachon, and possibly the New Aspiration Party. Matchima – a TRT splinter party – might also be part of the new political coalition. It is likely that this new political alliance will be more acceptable to the military and other conservative forces. These parties have proved over the year that they adhere more strongly to democratic principles. But more importantly, these parties are believed to practice political moderation – not political extreme like the way Thaksin did. Unfortunately, political fragmentation will be a new political order, since it is unlikely that any one party will win sufficient parliamentary majority to form a government in their own right.

### **4) What about the already politicized—or rather, Thaksinized rural electorate?**

Of significance are the people in Isaan. There is a lot of myth about these people selling votes to higher political bidders. But in many ways, these people are politically astute. Thai Rak Thai did bring them concrete benefits,

so a sizable number of voters will continue on with Thai Rak Thai – albeit under a new name.

**5) What role should be given to the military, police, security organizations like the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC), bureaucracy and judiciary in the post-coup?**

Since the 1992 uprising – and military suppression against the demonstrators – military leaders including General Surayud Chulanont realised the damage a coup could cause to the country and they clearly refrained from showing any of that inclination for 15 years or so. General Surayud himself played a significant role during his tenure as the Army Commander-in-Chief in the late-1990s in socialising the military to accept democracy as a political norm in Thailand. And this is the sort of thing that leads one to say that this coup was a last resort—not an attempt by the military to seek to hold on to power as in the past. Any attempt to hold on to political power would be political suicide for the military.

However, it is fair to say that the military will try to maintain a considerable political influence from the outside. Security agencies like ISOC are now playing a very important political role and they will likely maintain this position. ISOC, for example, is currently spread its wings down to the provincial level under the pretext of maintaining national security. However, the more immediate task for ISOC is to try to prevent the former TRT from making a political come-back.

**6) The Monarchy.**

There has been considerable discussion about the role of the King since the coup, particularly among debates generated by academics in the West. These Western analysts or academics tend to view the role of the King negatively, particularly in relation to Thai democratization. My view, however, is that the Thai Monarchy, if we go back to the time since King Vajiravudh, (Rama VI), actually set the stage for democratic development in Thailand. In fact, following the 1932 coup, King Prachatipok, Rama VII, expressed his disappointment with the military because it seemed not to

follow through with the promise to hand power to the people. In effect, the military had taken the power or sovereignty from the Monarchy and retained it for themselves. And for most of the modern Thai political era since 1932, the military made use of the Monarchy to serve their interests.

In Thai culture the Monarch belongs to everyone, but it seems the military have made most political use of the institution.

It is important to appreciate the fact that the King is both an individual and institution. As an institution, the King is historically and culturally embedded in the social and political structures of Thailand. This is uniquely and intelligibly Thai. So, institutionally or structurally speaking, the King can be constructed in many ways – socially, culturally, cosmologically, spiritually, economically, and politically. And I must say the Thais – the mainstream or majority Thais – have chosen in their minds to construct the King as a supreme spiritual and moral being.

So, any discussion about the role of the King would have to take into consideration:

- The specific Thai social, cultural, political and historical contexts.
- The fact that any political role that the Monarch may play is shaped by specific historical circumstances, including the other political actors around the King. The King only reacts in a particular way to specific political actors or events. For instance, if Thaksin were not the kind of PM that he was, would the King have acted the way he had, which sharpened the view that Thaksin challenged the King?

In the final analysis, however, it is fair to say that the King's role is basically to serve as an internal self-correcting mechanism when things are not going well in Thailand. He is a balancing "pillar" in Thai politics. Of course, it is

also important to acknowledge here that the Monarchy represents traditional or conservative forces in the Thai society.

## THE RISE OF BUREAUCRATIC POLITY

“Bureaucratic polity” was dominant in Thailand’s politics since the political change in 1932 and was fading in the past 15 years or so. Bureaucratic polity privileges the bureaucratic elite led by the military and supported by a section of domestic capitalist and the middle classes. Thaksin by no means initiated the marginalisation of the bureaucratic dominance; to a considerable degree, governments under Prime Ministership of Chatchai Choonhavan between 1988-91, and Anand Panyarachun, between 1991-92, put in place policies and practices that were conceivably undermining the power and prestige of the bureaucratic elites including the military. But one has to say that Thaksin was more pronounced in his attempts to replace an old-style and rule-based bureaucratic elitism with business management practices and culture. Thaksin saw running Thailand was just like running a company, indicating a major shift in the way state affairs were managed. “A company is a country. A country is a company. They are the same. The management is the same”.<sup>4</sup>

To a large degree, the September 19 coup symbolizes a victory for the bureaucratic traditionalists over the Thaksin-led coalition, particularly when Prem was perceived as playing a key role. Prem was a champion of bureaucratic politics. When he was Prime Minister, between 1980–1988, Prem presided over one of the most successful and stable eras of “bureaucratic polity” after a turbulent experiment with full democracy between 1973–76. He became Prime Minister under a constitution that did not require a prime minister to be an elected parliamentarian and allowed the appointed Senate — most of whom were active and retired bureaucrats and military officers — to participate in choosing the Head of Government. Prem chose to mix in his cabinet and teams of advisors representatives from both political parties and technocrats.

Attempts to re-establish bureaucratic governance will not be easy; its return will characterise the new round of political struggles in Thailand, as many will resist this, especially if the military intends to be more involved in politics.

So, one way of re-establishing bureaucratic governance is to resort to Moral Authority that Thaksin lacked, not quite the mere merits of bureaucratic governance itself.

The issue of moral authority has proved effective in countering Thaksin. By 2004 and 2005, Thaksin's supporters left him in droves because they thought he was no longer a legitimate leader. Largely, they thought he lacked moral authority to rule. For the supporters-turned-opponents of Thaksin, the electoral mandate made up only a part of the whole legitimacy for a leader. Morality was another crucial part of legitimacy. In other words, Thaksin had all the power — seats in the parliament, some 16 million votes, the military and police forces, the bureaucracy, the media, and, by that time, considerable influence over scrutinizing agencies like the National Counter Corruption Commission and Constitutional Court. Unfortunately, Thaksin lacked a strong moral authority to rule.

In the Thai context, a very important source of morality for a political leader lies in Buddhist-based virtues, including honesty, integrity, righteousness, truthfulness, loving kindness, modest living, selflessness, and sacrifices. King Bhumibol Adulyadej is popularly viewed as having these virtues which constitute moral authority.

This is why morality-based Bureaucratic Polity has evolved around the Monarch.

Arjaan Pattana Kitiarsa observes, "(Thaksin's) political power stemmed from his wealth and was often associated with amoral...sources. He is rarely described as a man/leader with merit or charisma. (H)e is no way close to

acquiring an aura of Buddhist righteous charisma, enjoyed by the King and his men (e.g. General Prem Tinsulanonda)".<sup>5</sup>

- 1 *Nation* (Bangkok), 11 December 2003, quoted in Pasuk Pongpaichit and Chris Baker, in *Journal of Democracy* 16, no. 2 (2005): 58.
- 2 Somkiat Onwimon (2004), “A One-Party Government: Feasibility, Implications on Thai Politics, and Some Concerns” *Sor Sor Ror Newsletter of the Club for the Former Members of the Constitutional Drafting Assembly* [First Volume, 2004]: 9.
- 3 Rattapong Sornsuparb and Prachak Namprasarnthai (2003) *The Economic System under Thaksin’s Model* (Bangkok: U-Express, 2003), p. 91–3.
- 4 Chumphon Phatraphon, *Thaksin rui thaorai nae* (How rich is Thaksin really!), quoted in Pasuk Pongpaichit and Chris Baker, in *Journal of Democracy* 16, no. 2 (2005): 62.
- 5 Pattana Kitiarsa, “In Defense of Thai-Style Democracy”, available at: <http://www.ari.nus.edu.sg/showfile.asp?eventfileid=188>, p. 6.