Thailand: minimally stable, minimally democratic

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International Political Science Review 2011 32: 512
DOI: 10.1177/0192512111418080

Article

International Political Science Review
32(5) 512–528

DOI: 10.1177/0192512111418080
ips.sagepub.com

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Abstract

This article, forming part of this volume's effort to map the qualities of democracy in Asia, describes Thailand (as of mid-2011) as a formal democracy devoid of each of the 'qualities' that promote democracy's full realization. Aside from offering an overall descriptive assessment, the article seeks to explain the relationship between the various qualities of democracy observed in Thailand over the past decade. While Thaksin Shinawatra's tenure in office (2001–2006) offers a compelling illustration for the proposition that 'not all good things go together,' virtually every dimension of the 'goodness' or 'quality' of Thailand's democracy has experienced a generalized decline since Thaksin's ousting in 2006.

Keywords

Democracy, democratization, developing nations, Thailand

Introduction

At best, any assessment of the qualities of democracy in Thailand provides a snapshot of what is otherwise a fast-moving scene. Since a bloodless coup d'état removed popular Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in 2006, the country has been in a constant state of flux; at times, it has appeared on the verge of a new regime change. Civilian governments have invariably been hobbled by prolonged and sometimes violent street demonstrations staged by groups calling alternately for more or less democracy. Rumors of an impending military coup have periodically returned to haunt the city of Bangkok. Tensions with Cambodia over the disputed Preah Vihear temple complex have continued to simmer. The southern insurgency rages on, with no resolution in sight, claiming hundreds of innocent lives each year. Meanwhile, the rural masses and the urban working class have grown restless over the repeated subversion of their electoral choices – faced with large protests in April and May 2010, the government claimed emergency powers and carried out one of the worst massacres of street demonstrators in the history of the country. Thailand's 83-year-old monarch – once regarded as a unifying figure – has been hospitalized since September 2009, in spite of periodic assurances

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that his health has long since returned to normal. While most agree that Thailand is in the midst of a transition, nobody quite knows where it is headed.

For this reason, the present assessment of Thailand's democracy, forming part of this volume's broader effort to map the qualities of democracy in Asia, describes a situation that remains far from settled or consolidated. Nonetheless, if a 'good' or 'quality' democracy is one that offers 'a stable institutional structure that realizes the liberty and equality of citizens through the legitimate and correct functioning of its institutions and mechanisms,' as per Morlino's (2009) definition, it is safe to say that Thailand fails on all counts. Its 'institutional structure' is unstable. 'Liberty' and 'equality' are undermined by the continuing interference of unelected institutions – the military, the judiciary, and palace insiders in particular. The current 'hybrid authoritarian' system of government (Thitinan, 2010a), moreover, suffers from a severe crisis of legitimacy. Conservative forces spearheaded by the 'Yellow Shirts' of the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) publicly advocate for doing away with even the façade of procedural democracy guaranteed by the post-coup constitution; their counterparts, the 'Red Shirts' of the National United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) demand the replacement of the current system of government with a 'real democracy' – one that would dispense with the long-standing extra-constitutional prerogatives reserved for the country's armed forces, the palace, and King Bhumibol's Privy Council.

Based on the framework put forth by Morlino (2009), Thailand is described in this study as a 'minimal democracy' – that is, a formal democracy devoid of each of the 'qualities' that improve a democratic regime and promote its full realization. Consistent with the approach illustrated in this volume by Dressel et al. (2011), an effort is made to analyze the co-variation observed between the various qualities of democracy over the past decade. This article also addresses Thailand's six-year political conflict, which remains far from a conclusive resolution. While the resulting instability of Thailand's political system places the country constantly on the brink of another reversal into direct military rule, the royalist establishment's crisis of legitimacy presents a historic opportunity to build a more meaningful, more substantive democracy.

Assessing the quality of democracy

The constitution promulgated by the military junta in August 2007 was ostensibly designed to restore civilian rule and representative government. The constitution provides for a parliamentary system of government within the framework of a constitutional monarchy. It sanctions the separation of powers between the three branches of government and guarantees the Thai people an array of civil and political rights consistent with liberal-democratic principles. But there is a vast difference between the practice of government and the window dressing offered by the constitution. First, important political decisions in Thailand are often made outside procedures mandated by the constitution, as institutions such as the military and the palace have long exercised powers well beyond their constitutional authority. This has been all the more so after the 2006 coup, which was motivated precisely by these institutions' determination to protect or re-assert their extra-constitutional prerogatives. Second, the constitution itself provides for mechanisms through which the country's judiciary can remove governments by dissolving political parties and by disqualifying elected officials from their posts. Third, the freedom of expression guaranteed in the constitution is limited by Article 112 of the Criminal Code, which criminalizes the offense of lèse majesté, and the more recent Computer Crimes Act. Finally, the government retains the authority to suspend most of the rights contained in the constitution through the Internal Security Act and Emergency Decree, both of which have been invoked repeatedly since the beginning of 2009.

Rule of law

Perhaps one of the most disturbing developments Thailand has experienced since the 2006 coup – and especially over the course of 2010 – is the subversion of the rule of law. The 2006 coup aimed not only to unseat a legitimate government, however flawed, but perhaps especially to dismantle the institutional framework that had permitted an elected leader to challenge the powers of unelected institutions. Since then, the rule of law has been systematically perverted through the royalist establishment's growing reliance on a politicized judicial branch, the use of the law as a weapon to intimidate or neutralize oppositions, the continuing dominance of the military over the political process, and the occasional recourse to state violence. At the same time, post-coup governments have made little to no progress on long-standing problems such as the country's southern insurgency, human rights, or the fight against corruption. According to the World Bank's *Worldwide Governance Indicators* (Kaufmann et al., 2010),[1] the 'Rule of Law' in Thailand has declined from a score of 0.51 to one of –0.13 between 2000 and 2009.

Thanks to a relatively organic and largely homegrown process of state formation and development, launched in the mid-nineteenth century, Thailand's overall levels of state capacity are quite high.[2] The bureaucracy is professionalized and differentiated, though its deficit of neutrality and accountability figures prominently in the claims of 'double standards' often made by opponents of the royalist establishment. The country's parliament and government are capable of producing high-quality legislation and of implementing government policies throughout the national territory. As a result, though still middling, Thailand's performance on the measures of 'Government Effectiveness' and 'Regulatory Quality' tends to be better than its performance on the other Worldwide Governance Indicators measured by the World Bank. Nonetheless, whereas the country had registered vast improvements on Government Effectiveness in the earlier part of the decade (from 0.07 in 2000 to 0.45 in 2005), scores have dropped off sharply since the 2006 coup (down to 0.15 in 2009).

Thailand's record on the provision of individual security and order is mixed. In a recent report on the subject of human security, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2010a: 43) concluded: 'Thai people run a relatively high risk of being victims of crime, especially violent crimes against the person.' While the incidence of property crime is moderate, Thailand suffers from high homicide rates and rates of gun violence among the highest in the world (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2008). Over the past several years, moreover, the country has experienced episodes of political violence, reflected both in street clashes between demonstrators and security forces (in 2008, 2009, and 2010) as well as in a campaign of mostly unresolved bombings that have taken place in Bangkok and other provinces during the year 2010.

With regard to individual security and order, an important distinction should be drawn between the three majority-Muslim southern provinces, where an insurgency continues to rage, and the rest of the country. In the provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, individual security is comparable to that in countries with active civil wars – almost every day, ordinary citizens and state officials are the victims of bombings, shootings, and beheadings. In the remainder of the country, citizens enjoy much greater levels of security. According to the Cingranelli-Richards Human Rights Data, levels of 'physical integrity' (range 0–8) have declined sharply between 2002 and 2008 (from 6 to 3). The steepest decline coincided with the outbreak of the southern insurgency in 2004. According to a report issued in February 2011 by the Southern Border Province Police Bureau, 7499 incidents recorded in the South since 2004 have caused 4200 deaths and 7773 injuries (Xiong Tong, 2011).

Whereas prosecution and conviction rates remain low when compared with the country's levels of recorded crime, and judicial proceedings tend to be plagued by waste and delays (Somkiat et al., 2010), Thailand does have a modern justice system distinguished by relatively high levels of

institutionalization and a moderate degree of efficiency. A recent survey by the Asia Foundation (2011: 65–72) confirmed that the judiciary is far and away the institution considered by the public to enjoy the highest degree of integrity and impartiality. One of the crucial factors undermining the rule of law in Thailand, however, is the increasing 'judicialization' of politics and the correspondingly intensifying use of the law as a political weapon against anti-establishment politicians and activists (Dressel, 2010).

This is perhaps most apparent in the role that the judiciary has played in the removal of three elected Prime Ministers over the past five years. The annulment of the elections held in April 2006, which had been boycotted by the opposition, served as a prelude to the removal of Thaksin Shinawatra. The Constitutional Court voided the election on controversial legal grounds, after a speech given by the King to a batch of newly appointed judges, where His Majesty urged the judiciary to 'solve' the country's current 'problem' and noted that the conduct of the election had been 'undemocratic.' Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej was forced to resign in September 2008 by a Constitutional Court decision that found his role as host of a pre-taped television cooking show illegal. Just three months later came the Court's dissolution of three government parties – the People Power Party, Chat Thai, and Matchima Thipataya – which forced the resignation of Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat and paved the way for Abhisit Vejjajiva's rise to Prime Minister. The courts' exclusive pursuit of parties that found themselves on the wrong side of the country's royalist establishment has exacerbated Thailand's political conflict (Thitinan, 2010b).

The country's judicial system, moreover, has acted swiftly in ordering the arrest, prosecution, and in some cases the conviction of hundreds of Red Shirt protesters accused of violating the Emergency Decree and other offenses in April and May 2010. Charges of terrorism were filed against Red Shirt leaders, who face possible death sentences. Meanwhile, security forces continue to enjoy complete impunity for the murder of Red Shirt demonstrators, while criminal cases lodged against pro-establishment Yellow Shirts – responsible for the three-month occupation of the Government House, the weeklong closure of Suvarnabhumi International Airport, and a series of violent incidents back in 2008 – languish in the courts. Even before the most recent, tragic incidents, Human Rights Watch (2010) pointed to this double standard in the application of the law as one of the key aspects of the erosion observed in the right to due process in Thailand. The government's recourse to arbitrary arrest, internment in secret locations, and the torture of Red Shirt detainees in the wake of the 2010 crackdowns marked an even more radical departure from Thailand's international obligations and basic standards of justice.[3]

Corruption and abuse of power remain endemic at all levels of government,[4] while corruption prosecutions tend to be selective and often politically motivated. In 2010, Transparency International ranked Thailand 68th of 180 countries on its Corruption Perceptions Index; though this constitutes a slight improvement since 2009, when it was ranked 84th, the same survey had ranked Thailand 61st in 2001 and 59th in 2005. Thailand's performance on the World Bank's Control of Corruption measure had also improved somewhat between 2002 (−0.29) and 2005 (−0.01), but declined in the aftermath of the coup (to −0.39 for 2008 and −0.23 for 2009).

Though Thailand's fight against corruption has considerable margins for improvement, the country fares even worse when it comes to keeping in check other forms of illegality and abuse of power in which state officials routinely engage. Historically, the police and the military have been deeply involved in all manners of illegal activity, including prostitution, human trafficking, arms smuggling, and the drug trade, for which they have enjoyed almost total impunity (Pasuk et al., 1999). Similarly, while the country suffers from a poor human rights record, human rights violations committed by the military and the police are almost never seriously investigated.

Thailand continues to be marred by unacceptably high levels of state violence, for which there is typically no accountability and little opportunity for redress. The massacre of over 80 Red Shirt demonstrators in April and May 2010 is just a recent example.[5] In this and other instances, security forces are known to show little respect for constitutional rights or the rights sanctioned in international agreements to which Thailand is a signatory. Even the episodes of state violence that took place during the administration of Thaksin Shinawatra, such as the 2003 'War on Drugs' and the massacre of 84 people in the southern town of Tak Bai in 2004, have not been the subject of any prosecutions in the years since the coup.

Perhaps most important of all, civilian control over the country's security forces remains minimal. In fact, the military retains vast powers to make and break civilian governments, as well as to dictate, reverse, or veto most national policy (for an overview, see Chambers, 2010). The military's insubordination did much to undermine the administration of Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat in 2008, while its active interference was crucial to the formation of Abhisit Vejjajiva's rag-tag coalition government shortly thereafter (Ferrara, 2011: 90–91). Thanks to its increased dominance over Thailand's political system, the military's budget has doubled in the years following the 2006 coup. With the imposition of the State of Emergency in April 2010 until its revocation in December, the generals' involvement in the governing process was formalized through the establishment of the Center for the Resolution of the Emergency Situation (CRES), which for a time appeared to have superseded the Cabinet as the country's foremost executive body. The military's outsized extra-constitutional authority remains at the heart of Thailand's political conflict. In and of itself, the generals' continuing insistence on making policy and choosing the country's leaders undermines democracy and the rule of law. At the same time, the prospects of a military coup constantly threaten to plunge Thailand back into military dictatorship.

Electoral accountability

After the military was driven out of politics in 1992, the country had seemed on the verge of consolidating a functioning electoral democracy, in part thanks to the new constitution introduced in 1997. With the 2006 coup, the process was brought to an abrupt end. In spite of the formal restoration of civilian rule a year later, vertical/electoral accountability has steadily eroded. Unelected institutions retain the means to overturn the results of elections. The press has been pressured, censored, and repressed to a degree not seen since at least the early 1980s. Popular political parties have been repeatedly disbanded, leaving most of the surviving party organizations weak, territorialized, internally divided, and poorly institutionalized.

Thai elections remain recurrent and intensely competitive. At the same time, a measure of fraud and vote buying continues to tarnish the electoral process (Callahan, 2005), while the military and other branches of the Thai state have taken to interfering in campaigns to secure the victory of pro-establishment parties. The army committed vast resources to the (unsuccessful) attempt to swing the last elections, held in 2007, in favor of the now governing Democrat Party (Human Rights Watch, 2007). Most troubling, unelected institutions such as the military and the judiciary have repeatedly overturned the results of elections over the past five years, either by military coup or by ordering the dissolution of ruling political parties. Since the coup, Thailand has failed to conform to the requirements spelled out by Freedom House to qualify as an 'electoral democracy' (Freedom House, 2010). Moreover, whereas the Cingranelli-Richards measure of 'Electoral Self-Determination' indicated 'very free and very open competition' until 2004, the right to self-determination has been found to exist with 'some limitations' in the years since. At the time of writing, new elections were

scheduled for 3 July 2011. Still, rumors of a military coup and the continuing threats of military/judicial interference undermine both the freedom and fairness of the electoral process (Pavin, 2011).

While print media and television channels have long been known for self-censorship as well as for their pro-monarchy and often pro-military slant (McCargo, 2000; Lewis, 2006), until quite recently oppositions in Thailand were permitted to air their differences with the government as well as offer alternative viewpoints and proposals. Freedom of the press has deteriorated markedly since the 2006 coup and especially in the wake of the recent disturbances in the streets of Bangkok. The government has closed down television stations, community radio stations, and magazines controlled by the opposition.[6] More 'mainstream' print/television media are routinely pressured by the government to offer favorable coverage and suppress inconvenient information (Pravit and Jiranan, 2010), while media organizations that offer independent viewpoints (like the website Prachatai) have been subjected to constant legal harassment (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2011). In addition, the government has committed vast amounts of money and manpower to monitoring and censoring internet content, as well as tracking down users who post comments or pictures considered offensive of the monarchy. As a result, the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology (MICT) has blocked between 50,000 and 500,000 web pages deamed to pose a threat to national security. Media restrictions have been increasingly severe after imposition of the Emergency Decree in 2010.[7]

In its most recent *World Press Freedom* survey, released in October 2010, Reporters Without Borders (2010b) ranked Thailand 153rd – lower than Afghanistan. This constitutes a sharp drop since 2004, when the country was ranked 59th. Later, Freedom House (2011a) downgraded Thailand's press to 'Not Free.' While, in the same survey, Thailand's press had slipped from 'Free' to 'Partly Free' during Thaksin Shinawatra's administration,[8] the deterioration observed over the past five years is especially marked. In fact, Thailand's press had never received a 'Not Free' rating since Freedom House started releasing aggregate scores for all media in the late 1980s. In a report focusing specifically on internet freedom, Freedom House (2011b) included Thailand in a list of five 'countries at risk' of further declines.

The freedom to form or join political parties remains relatively extensive. However, the rules on party dissolution and their selective enforcement impose severe limitations on the effective exercise of freedom of association, especially in instances where organized political parties pose a threat to the reserve domains of unelected institutions such as the military and the palace. The top vote-getters in the last three elections – Thai Rak Thai (2001, 2005) and the People Power Party (2007) – were dissolved by the courts. In the case of Thai Rak Thai, in May 2007 the junta-appointed court disbanded the party and disqualified over 100 of its executives from elected office for five years; the disqualification was based on a statute introduced after the coup and applied retroactively. In December 2008, the People Power Party (Thai Rak Thai's successor) was dissolved – again, its entire executive committee was banned from politics – based on the infractions of one of its executives, who was found to have engaged in vote buying in the run-up to the 2007 elections. Meanwhile, the Democrat Party (in 2007, 2008, and 2010) and coalition partners such as Bhum Jai Thai and Peua Paendin (in 2009) were repeatedly spared from dissolution on the basis of convenient technicalities.

These restrictions notwithstanding, Thailand has a competitive, multi-party system. However, the party system remains poorly institutionalized. Political parties are personalized and faction-ridden. Moreover, the existing parties exhibit weak ideological commitments and are rather heavily reliant on patronage. Most fall well short of being truly 'national parties' in either programmatic or organizational scope (Croissant and Volkel, 2011). Whereas Thailand's party system appeared to be well on its way to 'institutionalization' (Mainwaring and Scully, 1995) after Thai Rak Thai won three-quarters of the House seats in the 2005 elections, the subsequent dissolution of Thai Rak Thai and its successor have resulted in renewed fragmentation, factional politics, and instability (Ferrara, 2011: 84–90).

Inter-institutional accountability

Up to the introduction of the 1997 constitution, Thailand was said to be plagued by a serious deficit of inter-institutional accountability, for three reasons: 1) excessive dispersion of power in the relations between executive and the legislature (especially in light of the latter's fragmentation); 2) the weakness of institutions investigating corruption and malfeasance; and 3) the dominance of the central government over localities. The 1997 constitution to various extents sought to address each of these issues (Connors, 1999). Various provisions aimed to strengthen the executive, streamline the party system, institute a more stringent oversight regime, and increase decentralization. The constitution introduced in 2007, in the wake of the coup, weakened these provisions in order to mitigate some of their unintended consequences (Thitinan, 2008). No meaningful improvement in horizontal/inter-institutional accountability can be said to have been engineered as a result.

Whereas the introduction of the 1997 constitution ushered in an era of executive dominance over the legislature, the constitution written in the aftermath of the coup has brought about greater dispersion in the horizontal distribution of government power. Because, moreover, Abhisit Vejjajiva's administration was supported by a narrow, heterogeneous, and relatively unprincipled legislative majority, over the course of its tenure the government has often had the appearance of being a hostage of its legislative coalition. Levels of executive dominance increased dramatically after the government imposed the Internal Security Act in March 2010 and then the Emergency Decree in April 2010. As power shifted to the executive and, especially, CRES, the legislature appeared to have been reduced to a cheerleading, rubberstamp role.

The 1997 constitution established a number of independent agencies as a means to fight human rights violations (National Human Rights Commission), corruption (National Anti-Corruption Commission), and other abuses of power committed in all three branches of government. At the same time, an independent Election Commission was given wide-ranging authority to investigate allegations of fraud and vote buying. While the administration of Thaksin Shinawatra was harshly criticized for domesticating these agencies by co-opting their members or by manipulating their composition (Pasuk and Baker, 2009: 184–188), since the coup these organizations have functioned largely as an extension of the country's royalist establishment.

Though the 2007 elections were denounced by organizations like Human Rights Watch and Freedom House as being tainted primarily by the military's campaign in support of the Democrat Party, the vast majority of constituencies where the Election Commission (ECT) ordered a re-vote based on alleged irregularities were those that had been won by the People Power Party. Having repeatedly shown a great deal of leniency for the Democrat Party and its allies, under pressure from the opposition the ECT recommended that the Democrats also be disbanded in 2010, on the basis of violations of party financing rules. The cases were tainted by a scandal that exposed the Constitutional Court's lack of impartiality and the politicization of the proceedings (*The Economist*, 2010). While refusing to rule on the Democrat Party's guilt or innocence, the Court later dismissed both cases on procedural grounds.

Despite recent reforms in the direction of decentralization (specifically, in the 1997 Constitution and the 1999 Decentralization Act), Thailand is governed by a highly centralized, unitary state.[9] With the exception of Bangkok, all provincial governors are appointed by the Ministry of Interior; the central government retains strong oversight on the functioning of local governments, whose legislative/fiscal autonomy remains exceedingly low.

Political participation

Opportunities for participation in Thailand are acceptably open but overall not especially well developed. On the one hand, levels of electoral participation are relatively high, civil society

organizations are plentiful, and street protests are recurrent. On the other hand, popular participation in the country's associational life is comparatively low, while the state has recently repressed demonstrations with an iron fist. Opportunities for citizen participation in the policy-making process and deliberative democracy arenas remain weak.

While just under 75 percent of eligible voters participated in the legislative election held in 2007, only a slight decrease from previous elections (less than a one percent drop from 2005), active participation in organizations like parties and other civil society groups is quite low. Parties generally boast millions of members, but the involvement of the overwhelming majority of such members is simply nominal – opportunities for citizens to participate are limited by the poor institutionalization of party organizations and the top-down structure of most parties (Croissant and Chambers, 2010). In addition, though Thailand has a large and intricate network of non-governmental organizations – some of which have been quite successful in the promotion of various causes over the last two decades – participation is restricted to a relatively narrow segment of the population (Albritton and Thawilwadee, 2002).

Over the past decade, Thailand has experienced a resurgence of non-conventional forms of political participation (mostly street politics). Large and sometimes protracted demonstrations in Bangkok have been held in 2006, 2008, 2009, and 2010 – most notably by the Yellow Shirts of the PAD and the Red Shirts of the UDD. Though such demonstrations have been highly disruptive – and have at times contributed to the collapse of governments – overall the percentage of the population actively involved in either movement is not especially high. Suppression has been brutal but selective and focused almost exclusively on the anti-establishment Red Shirts. Over 80 Red Shirts were killed in April and May 2010; hundreds more were injured and detained by the state. Meanwhile, thus far the Yellow Shirts have enjoyed near-complete impunity – even for the series of illegal, violent actions that culminated in the weeklong occupation of Suvarnabhumi International Airport in 2008.

Political competition

Ostensibly, Thaksin Shinawatra was removed for having established something of an 'elected dictatorship' that concentrated vast amounts of power in the hands of the Prime Minister and his party. In practice, the subsequent dismantling of Thai Rak Thai, the court-ordered dissolution of its successor, the People Power Party, and the defection of former allies who were bribed and cajoled into supporting Abhisit's administration have rendered party competition more fluid.

On paper, the possibility of government alternation has greatly increased since the ouster of Thaksin Shinawatra in 2006. In Sartori's (1976) parlance, Thaksin had effectively built a 'predominant party,' which by virtue of its popularity all but foreclosed constitutional avenues to government alternation. The coup and the events that followed have succeeded in weakening the integrity of Thaksin's coalition, rendering the two main electoral blocs much more evenly matched. The 2007 elections ushered in a more fragmented legislature (seven parties won seats; only four had won seats in 2005) and greater dispersion of votes away from the largest party.

At the same time, the repressive measures that were necessary to trigger the partial unraveling of Thaksin's coalition and turn the Democrat Party into a viable contender cannot be said to reflect well on the quality of democracy in Thailand. Moreover, the continuing opposition of the military and the palace has severely limited the ability of parties and politicians associated with Thaksin Shinawatra to compete on a level playing field, or govern the country after scoring victories at the ballot box. Because the 2006 coup restored the power of unelected institutions at the expense of elected politicians, the result has been to narrow the scope of political competition.

Freedom

While liberal freedoms had already undergone measurable erosion during Thaksin Shinawatra's five-year tenure in office, the situation deteriorated much further after the 2006 coup. Perhaps most troubling on this count has been the record-breaking number of prosecutions that were launched in 2009 and 2010 against citizens who dared to speak out against the monarchy (Streckfuss, 2010). Not only have the country's lèse majesté legislation and the Computer Crimes Act been grossly abused over the past two years; most of the trials are held in secret for reasons of 'national security,' while the press refrains from reporting the content of the offenses for fear of running afoul of the laws (Macan-Markar, 2010). The restriction of liberal freedoms has only intensified with the imposition of the Emergency Decree in April 2010, which allowed the government to censor all manners of media outlets and arrest hundreds of people for participating in 'illegal' gatherings. As a wealth of international organizations have pointed out, in the absence of any threat to the 'survival of the nation,' the State of Emergency restricted political/civil rights in ways inconsistent with Thailand's obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.[10]

Most features of personal dignity are legally recognized, though their realization is limited by objective constraints and the state's inaction. Human Rights Watch (2010; 2011a) has documented the deterioration that Thailand's human rights situation has undergone over the past several years. Its treatment of asylum seekers belonging to the Rohingya, Karen, and Hmong ethnic groups has been singled out as a source of special concern. During the violent suppression of the Red Shirt rallies, moreover, the security forces and the civilian leadership have been harshly criticized by international human rights advocacy groups such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the Committee to Protect Journalists, and Reporters Without Borders for their disregard for human life. Thailand also remains a major source, destination, and transit point for human trafficking, especially the trafficking of young women and children for the purposes of sexual exploitation (Kamala, 2005).

Most civil/political rights are constitutionally sanctioned but not appropriately guaranteed. Civil rights are abused by the country's security forces as a matter of course, while possibilities of legal remedy remain extremely low for the vast majority of the population. The free exercise of political rights is hindered by the constant interference of unelected institutions in the political process, while draconian and aggressively enforced legislation limits forms of political expression considered injurious to the monarchy. For 2010, Freedom House assigned the country a score of 4 on its measure of Civil Liberties and 5 on its measure of Political Rights. While Freedom House had already evidenced some erosion in Political Rights between 2004 and 2005 (from a score of 2 to 3; Civil Liberties remained stable at 3 throughout Thaksin Shinawatra's administration), current levels of freedom compare unfavorably with the situation before the coup. Freedom House (2011c: 20) further noted that Thailand's 'downward trend' continues owing to 'the use of violence in putting down street protests in April and May 2010, and the coercive use of lèse-majesté laws and emergency powers to limit freedom of expression and personal autonomy.' Even though its last available data only cover a time period up to 2009, the most recent World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators show that Thailand is one of the countries where levels of Voice/Accountability have declined most steeply over the past decade (Kaufmann et al., 2010).

Solidarity/equality

Thailand's performance on the other substantive dimension of democracy – solidarity and equality – also leaves much to be desired. During his tenure in office, former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra pushed through programs that guaranteed affordable medical care and educational loans to low-income

families and attempted to incentivize small-business investments in the provinces. As a result, Thailand not only witnessed a drastic, 50 percent reduction in poverty rates (United Nations Development Programme, 2010a: 12), but perhaps more importantly a reduction in levels of inequality in some of its poorest regions (World Bank, 2005). At the same time, Thaksin's appeal to the country's provincial electorate and the urban poor brought into the fold constituencies previously known for their indifference and acquiescence (Wilson, 1962). Ironically, these policies figured prominently in the case made by Thaksin's enemies to justify his removal from office. His Yellow Shirt opponents, whose support is especially strong among urban, upper middle-class voters, went so far as to advocate that democracy be scrapped altogether in light of the provincial electorate's ignorance and propensity to sell their votes.

Thailand continues to be home to vast inequalities in wealth and other resources. According to the UNDP, Thailand's Gini coefficient is over 0.5, evidencing far greater inequality than countries like Malaysia, the Philippines, or Indonesia; inequality, moreover, has risen considerably over the past four decades (United Nations Development Programme, 2010b: 79). The benefits of the country's sustained growth are distributed very unevenly. Partly as a result, its Human Development Index is a middling 0.783 – similar to Iran, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. According to the most recent World Development Indicators issued by the World Bank (2010), while the top ten percent of the population account for 42.6 percent total income and consumption in 2009 (up dramatically from 33.7 percent in 2004 and now among the highest rates in the entire data set), the lowest ten percent account for only 1.6 percent of all income/consumption (down sharply from 2.6 percent in 2004).

Discrimination is widespread and based most prominently on the partially overlapping class/regional/ethnic cleavages. The ethnic Lao/Khmer peoples inhabiting the country's Northeast (about 30 percent of the total population) have long been relegated to the role of second-class citizens – they routinely suffer from limited economic opportunities and racist portrayals in media and popular culture.[11] Smaller northern hill tribes (Gillogly, 2004) and southern Malay-Muslims are exposed to still worse forms of discrimination (McCargo, 2009). Moreover, though women are well represented in the labor force and in the tertiary student population, Thailand remains a country where men monopolize positions of real power in politics and government (United Nations Development Programme, 2010b). Overall, its score on the UNDP's Gender Inequality Index is a modest 0.586.

Owing to both objective constraints and lack of political will, the welfare state remains highly underdeveloped in Thailand. Social rights are not guaranteed by the constitution; even the most progressive administrations have stopped well short of establishing a true social safety net and a full array of social, economic, and cultural rights. Because of its lack of popularity with the provincial electorate, the government of Abhisit Vejjajiva has initiated a number of 'populist' programs designed to promote development or at least alleviate poverty in some of the country's less affluent regions. However, these programs rarely amount to more than handouts or particularistic, pork barrel projects, sometimes presented explicitly as 'gifts' (Sopranzetti, 2011).

Responsiveness

By all accounts, Thailand is undergoing a deep crisis of legitimacy.[12] Governments of any color and stripe must expend considerable energy and time merely consolidating their position. Small but powerful segments of the electorate (especially urban elites) question the legitimacy of procedural democracy (or at least the outcomes it produces), while the rural population and urban poor are growing increasingly disaffected as a result of seeing their choices at the ballot box repeatedly overturned. Polls indicate that the vast majority of the Thai public support democracy (83.9 percent in the 2005 Asia Barometer, down from 90.5 in 2002) and do not identify with either the Yellow or

the Red movement, but levels of dissatisfaction are high (especially in the country's North and Northeast).[13] Polarization, moreover, was only aggravated by the most recent episodes of political/state violence. Today, Thailand is among the world's most politically unstable countries – according to the World Bank, its level of Political Stability and Absence of Violence (−1.11) is lower than Uganda's and just slightly higher than Mauritania's. Some analysts now speak openly of Thailand's political conflict as a 'slow-burn civil war' (Montesano, 2011).

In light of Thailand's high levels of institutional development and state capacity, as well as its long experience with various forms of democratic competition and participation, there are no meaningful external constraints to democratization and government responsiveness. While elected politicians are widely seen as corrupt and incompetent, unelected institutions like the military and the palace, which insist on exercising overriding influence over the political process, remain the main hindrances to the country's democratization.

An overall assessment

There is virtually no definition of democracy to which Thailand may be said to conform. Despite its appropriation of some of the trappings of democracy, as of mid-2011 Thailand was for the most part an authoritarian regime. In the increasingly rare instances where their grip on power appears secure, unelected institutions like the military and the palace have shown themselves eager to practice a 'soft' version of authoritarianism. As the recent massacre of Red Shirt protesters demonstrates, however, the military does not hesitate to resort to 'hard' authoritarian measures whenever deemed necessary. Based on Morlino's (2009) terminology, Thailand falls in the broad category reserved for formal democracies 'without qualities.' More specifically, because the country fails to rise to an acceptable standard on *each* of the dimensions relevant to the classification – rule of law, accountability, responsiveness, freedom, and equality – Thailand is best described as a 'minimal democracy.'

While former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra has been rightfully criticized for lodging defamation suits against critics, putting pressure on the media, and overseeing widespread human rights violations in the context of his 2003 War on Drugs and his response to the insurgency in the south, the past five years – perhaps most strikingly, during Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva's term – have marked the subversion of every major aspect of democracy. The *law* is increasingly used as a political weapon. What is worse, the government's frequent recourse to repressive legislation and its reliance on a politicized judiciary have thoroughly subverted other dimensions of the quality of democracy. *Accountability* has been minimized by the ongoing campaign to silence unsympathetic media and the courts' power to suitably alter the outcomes of elections by disbanding freely constituted political parties. *Freedom* has been undermined through the abuse of laws (lèse majesté and the Computer Crimes Act) that restrict constitutionally sanctioned rights in non-emergency situations, as well as laws (like the Emergency Decree and the Internal Security Act) that suspend such rights in situations of supposed national emergencies. And if the presence of vast extra-constitutional reserve domains for unelected institutions has diminished the value of *competition*, the law is routinely wielded as a tool to justify the suppression of forms of *participation* to which the opposition has recurred to campaign against the subversion of the democratic process.

These considerations suggest that while Dressel et al.'s (2011) comparative analysis evidenced only a weak relationship between the *rule of law* and other democratic qualities in the Asia-Pacific, post-coup Thailand appears to buck the trend, in that the deterioration of most procedural qualities of democracy and one of the aspects of democratic content (freedom) can be directly linked to the subversion of the *rule of law.* In addition, if government responsiveness, intended as satisfaction and legitimacy, refers to the 'outcome' of the democratic process, the case of Thailand evidences a clear

recursive relationship between this dimension of the quality of democracy and the others. On the one hand, Thailand's crisis of legitimacy has been fueled, since the 2006 coup, by the dismantlement of 'procedural' aspects of democracy (*rule of law* and *accountability*), the subversion of the outcomes produced by the 'processes' of *participation* and *competition*, and the hollowing out of its more 'substantive' dimensions such as *freedom* and *equality*. On the other hand, the resulting instability has led the government of Abhisit Vejjajiva to double down on authoritarian measures, ushering in still greater polarization and deepening discontent among vast segments of the provincial electorate and the urban poor.

The key to understanding both the collapse in the qualities of Thailand's formal democracy, and the instability that the country has experienced as a result, is the decline in the legitimacy accorded to the informal structure of government by which Thailand has been ruled over the past several decades. In the foreign press, Thailand is often described as a 'constitutional monarchy'; consistent with one of the main requirements Dahl (1971) sets out for 'polyarchy,' control over government decisions is indeed 'constitutionally vested in elected officials.' Since 1932, however, Thailand has always been distinguished by a large gap between its 'formal' and 'material' constitutions. As a result, real political power rarely has rested with elected officials, whose autonomy is limited by the extra-constitutional domains reserved by a network of palace insiders, royal advisors, top military officers, high level bureaucrats, judges, and business elites.[14] In academic circles, this clique is known as the 'network monarchy' (McCargo, 2005), reflecting the precipitous rise in royal power and prestige accomplished over the past five decades.

Since the late 1970s, Thailand's 'network monarchy' has generally been willing to allow enhancements in many of the 'qualities' of Thailand's formal democracy, but only insofar as the rule of law, accountability, participation, competition, and higher degrees of freedom did not meaningfully affect the reserve domains of unelected institutions. As a result, Thailand gradually moved from a version of 'pseudo-democracy' to 'electoral democracy' in the 1980s, and again after the events of 'Black May' 1992. Later, in 1997, prominent royalists played a major role in the drafting of the country's first-ever liberal constitution (Connors, 2008), which aimed to enhance most procedural and substantive qualities of Thailand's democracy.

Thailand's transition to a liberal democracy, however, could be said to have never been completed. The country's democratization, in fact, was hindered by much the same obstacles faced by transitional countries where the process does not occur as a result of the collapse or, in Huntington's parlance, the 'replacement' of an authoritarian regime (Huntington, 1991). Institutions such as the palace and the military remained intent on retaining their 'non-democratic prerogatives' (Linz and Stepan, 1996: 67) and for the most part retained the moral authority, hierarchical structure, and means of physical coercion to protect their reserve domains. This not only placed constraints on the degree to which Thailand could democratize (especially with regard to qualities such as the *rule of law*, *accountability*, and *freedom*). The active attempt by the palace–military alliance to undermine elected politicians and prevent the aggregation of political forces capable of challenging its extra-constitutional authority[15] softened the public's confidence in democratic institutions, weakened elected governments, and favored a style of politics founded on particularism, patronage, and corruption.

Thaksin's meteoric rise to political power took place thanks to a constellation of factors of both a structural and contingent nature. Contingent factors include the 1997 Asian crisis as well as Thaksin's own unique skills, resources, and personal biography, while structural and institutional factors are related to the inchoateness of the country's party system and the reforms contained in the new constitution, respectively. The 1997 Asian crisis, in particular, inflicted a severe blow (in terms of both resources and popularity) on existing political parties, national leaders, and local notabilities. Thaksin, whose telecommunications empire had suffered little from the crisis, was in an ideal position to benefit

from the weakening of local sources of money and patronage. His party Thai Rak Thai absorbed a multitude of politicians whom other parties increasingly did not have the means to recruit due to the weakening of their provincial backers (Ockey, 2004: 45–46). Thanks to an impressive war chest, a simple platform that resonated with vast swaths of the electorate, and a carefully crafted image as a strong and decisive leader, Thaksin assembled a formidable coalition in the 2001 elections, when Thai Rak Thai only came two seats short of an absolute majority, an achievement without precedent in Thailand's electoral history.

Over the ensuing four years, Thaksin embarked on a successful effort to make Thai Rak Thai into a dominant force in Thai politics by co-opting the leaders, factions, and politicians of all major parties except the Democrats. In this, Thaksin was aided by provisions in the 1997 constitution that aimed to strengthen the stability of legislative majorities. At the same time, Thaksin's populist policies proved immensely popular with provincial voters and the urban poor. The popularity of these programs, in turn, allowed Thai Rak Thai to 'take credit for improvements in the lives of villagers, at the expense of the provincial and local notables who had previously characterized such resource allocation as personal rather than party patronage' (Ockey, 2004: 50). In the 2005 general elections, Thai Rak Thai took 375 out of a total of 500 lower house seats.

Thanks to his electoral popularity, Thaksin was in a position to mount perhaps the most effective assault on the reserve domains of unelected institutions. But the manner in which Thaksin wielded his powers had a decidedly mixed impact on the qualities of Thailand's democracy. On the one hand, Thaksin's ability to reverse the long-standing fractionalization and instability of the Thai party system, and his ability to galvanize and empower segments of the population once known for their indifference to national politics, produced improvements in several such qualities, including *electoral accountability*, *participation*, *competition*, and *solidarity/equality*. On the other hand, the unprecedented accumulation of powers in the hands of an elected, civilian leader gave Thaksin a mandate to pursue policies that eroded several other qualities of Thailand's democracy. The *rule of law* was undermined by corruption and, especially, by the state violence unleashed by the 2003 War on Drugs and the response to the southern insurgency in 2004. *Inter-institutional accountability*, moreover, took a hit as a result of Thaksin's successful attempt to vanquish independent state agencies, while the restrictions (formal and otherwise) placed on freedom of the press in turn drove the decline in levels of *freedom*. After the 2005 elections, while the reserve domains of unelected institutions appeared increasingly endangered, Thailand seemed headed towards a form of democracy with a much stronger 'delegative' (O'Donnell, 1994) than 'liberal' flavor.

Characteristically, Thaksin's removal from office in 2006 had less to do with his efforts to establish an 'elected dictatorship' than the attempt he had made to dismantle the country's 'network monarchy' and project the power of his government deep into institutions such as the bureaucracy and the military, traditionally impervious to encroachments by elected officials. After his bone-crushing victory in 2005, Thaksin was much too strong to be cajoled, bullied, or undermined through the relatively subtle, inconspicuous means the network monarchy had employed to keep many of his predecessors in check. And so the military stepped in, not merely to unseat Thaksin, but perhaps especially to lay the groundwork for his prosecution, confiscate his assets, dismantle those provisions in the 1997 constitution that protected his dominance, and put new safeguards in place against his return. When Thaksin did come back, if only by proxy, after the 2007 election, the People's Alliance for Democracy mounted an increasingly violent campaign to unseat the democratically elected government. In that endeavor, the PAD was aided by the military, which ignored government orders to disperse the occupations of the Government House and Suvarnabhumi International Airport in late November 2008. In a context of protracted stalemate, the Constitutional Court staged its widely anticipated 'judicial coup' and dissolved the ruling People Power Party. Shortly thereafter, Abhisit Vejjajiva was

made Prime Minister on the strength of a motley legislative coalition patched together with the assistance of the military and the palace.

The 'network monarchy' gambled its own survival on the removal of Thaksin Shinawatra and his proxies. Not only did the repeated subversion of the popular will breathe new life into a movement – the Red Shirts of the UDD – it quickly turned into a thorn in the side of Abhisit's government. The actions of the palace, the military, and the urban elites have given rise to widespread revulsion for the establishment, and growing resentment for the monarchy. The royalist establishment's willingness to risk its own destruction to eradicate Thaksin's influence is frequently attributed to its fear of the upcoming royal succession – in particular, its determination to prevent Thaksin Shinawatra from taking advantage of the popular King's passing to completely dismantle the 'network monarchy.' It remains to be seen whether the gamble will turn out to have paid off, or to have merely accelerated the old order's demise. Nonetheless, the extraordinary lengths to which the palace and the military have gone to preserve their extra-constitutional prerogatives suggest that these institutions remain the foremost impediment to Thailand's democratization, as well as the greatest threat to the stability of the country.

Beyond 'Thai-style' democracy

Despite the appearance of representative government provided by the constitution, Thailand falls well short of meeting just about every standard set out in this volume to measure the qualities of democratic governance. The rule of law remains in a tenuous state. Accountability is minimal. At any given time, governments are perceived by large segments of the population as illegitimate. Freedom of expression is repressed by Orwellian thought crime legislation, while freedom of association is systematically undermined by the interference of the judiciary. And equality – intended both as 'equality under the law' and 'equality of opportunity' – remains far from achieving any measure of realization. Based on dimensions of the quality of democracy identified by Morlino (2009), Thailand should be described as a 'minimal democracy.' Significantly, though, while the country's democracy has been eviscerated of just about any meaningful 'quality,' the form of 'hybrid authoritarianism' that has taken shape over the past two and a half years is just as fragile and weakly institutionalized.

Whereas Thaksin Shinawatra's tenure in office provides a compelling illustration for Dressel et al.'s (2011) proposition that not all good things go together, the disturbing developments since Thaksin's ouster suggest that most bad things very well might go together. Not only did virtually every dimension of the 'goodness' or 'quality' of Thailand's democracy experience a generalized decline since the 2006 coup; the deterioration in each appears to have taken place in a recursive, mutually reinforcing relation with the others. More than the support for democracy, to which a vast majority of the population remains committed, what seems to have been destroyed as a result is the legitimacy of unelected institutions, as well as their ability to exercise their extra-constitutional prerogatives without the array of repressive measures that continue to undermine most democratic qualities. Persistent concerns about the possibility of a military coup reflect the tenuousness of the network monarchy's grasp on political power, which is threatened even by the 'minimal' democracy Thailand has developed since Thaksin's removal.

Some observers may be tempted to interpret Thailand's political crisis as another instance of the failure of democracy in the developing world. Whatever the merits of the various criticisms often leveled against the workings of liberal democracy in non-Western settings, the case of Thailand says more about the failure of a particular form of hybridized authoritarianism – what has been known since the late 1950s as 'Thai-Style Democracy' – than it does about the inadequacies of free,

representative government. While nobody quite knows what will eventually come of the turmoil Thailand has experienced over the past several years, it is probably safe to say that the only chance of stability is offered by a new social and political compact that recognizes the people's right to govern their own country – at long last, a 'real' democracy.

Notes

1. Worldwide Governance Indicators range from a best of 2.5 to a worst of –2.5.
2. For an overview of the historical process, as well as strengths and limitations, see Vandergeest and Peluso (1995).
3. For a recent assessment, see Human Rights Watch (2011a).
4. For a landmark study on this subject, see Pasuk and Sungsidh (1999).
5. See, among others, reports by Reporters Without Borders (2010a) and Human Rights Watch (2011b).
6. See, for example, Human Rights Watch (2011c).
7. For a detailed analysis of each of the aspects described above, see Asian Media Barometer (2011).
8. The *World Press Freedom Index* by Reporters Without Borders registered a similar decline between 2004 and 2005 (Thaksin's last full year in office), when Thailand's ranking slipped down to 107th place.
9. For a description of the reforms and their limitations, see Arghiros (2001).
10. Organizations that repeatedly urged Thailand to lift the emergency decree in 2010 include Amnesty International, the International Crisis Group, the International Commission of Jurists, and the Asian Human Rights Council.
11. For historical background, see Keyes (1968). See also Streckfuss (1993).
12. A recent edited volume (Askew, 2010) addresses several aspects of the crisis.
13. See various items in Asia Foundation (2011).
14. In this sense, Thailand has always failed Schmitter and Karl's (1991: 81) additional requirement: 'Popularly elected officials must be able to exercise their constitutional powers without being subjected to overriding (albeit informal) opposition from unelected officials.'
15. For an illustration of how the palace typically sought to undermine elected politicians, see Handley (2006).

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