



Reluctant populists: Learning populism in Thailand

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Abstract

Almost all popular and academic assessments of Thaksin Shinawatra label him a populist, with his time in power characterized by populism. Through an assessment of conceptual accounts of populism and a discussion of Thaksin's political campaigning and his prime ministership, it is argued that this characterization is inaccurate. While electorally popular, Thaksin's populism was slow to develop. Thaksin's emergence as a populist reflected a configuration of political circumstances that forced him to rely increasingly on the support of an electoral base made up of the relatively less well-off. In failing to account for the development of Thaksin as a populist, an important element of Thaksin's politics and of populism as a form of politics is missed. Thaksin was made a populist by elite opposition, military coup and the political demands by the red shirt mass movement wanting social and economic equality underpinned by electoral representation.

Keywords

Populism, Thailand, Thaksin Shinawatra, elites, political conflict

Introduction

There are two accepted truths regarding Thailand's recent politics. First, Thailand has failed to embed a functioning electoral politics. While counts vary, there have been 12 successful military coups since 1932 when the absolute monarchy was overthrown. Following the latest putsch in 2014, the military crafted the country's 20th post-1932 constitution. The 2006 and 2014 military interventions reflected an elite desire to eradicate the political influence of Thaksin Shinawatra, whose affiliated political parties have won every national election since 2000. The second truth, and the focus of this article, is that Thaksin was a populist, supported by the rural poor.

Due to the variation in the situations identified with the emergence of populist politics, from the political right to left, in economically advanced and developing nations and in democracies and non-democracies, there have been efforts to determine populism's core characteristics (see Canovan, 1981; Hadiz and Chryssogelos, 2017; Taggart, 2000). Developing these characteristics

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and applying them to the case of Thaksin's populism, this article will suggest, as others have done, that Thaksin only gradually adopted an identifiably political populism (Phongpaichit and Baker, 2008). However, in contrast with their assessments, this article posits that it was the 2006 military coup, Thaksin's subsequent political banishment, the loss of his party and the repeated elite-inspired frustration of pro-Thaksin parties that saw him adopt a full-throated populist politics and a reliance on a mass base. This argument is not merely about dating Thaksin's populism, but seeks to explain Thaksin's populism in a way that moves attention from Thaksin as leader to Thaksin associated with a political movement. This brings the political mass into sharper focus.

In recent times, the identification of Thaksin as populist has been broadly accepted. So strong has this identification been that Thaksin has become a comparator for the analysis of other Asian leaders said to be populists, most recently Indonesia's President Joko Widodo (Mietzner, 2015: 57). Yet this labelling of populism with little attention to what makes populism and a populist leader is unenlightening. Indeed, the tendency to equate populism with popularity and popular, redistributive policies can hide as much as it reveals. In the case of Thaksin, the use of populism as a term of political abuse potentially blinds us to the ways in which a leader, who was not a populist when he came to electoral politics, was manoeuvred by political challenges to adopt populism, eventually making an elite politician heavily reliant on a political movement.

To understand the emergence of Thaksin and the identification of his politics as populist, it is important to pay attention to the social, economic and political circumstances of his rise and the challenges he faced. The intention of the sections that follow is to demonstrate that while the conditions for populist politics existed, Thaksin was not a populist when he formed his Thai Rak Thai Party (TRT or Thais Love Thais Party), when he campaigned for office, nor when he came to the prime ministership in 2001. Thaksin was electorally popular and his policies were welcomed by the electorate, yet his populism developed as political opposition intensified. Thaksin's populist turn reflected political circumstances that eventually forced him to rely on the support of the red shirt movement.¹ The circumstances that manoeuvred Thaksin into becoming a populist were elite opposition, political exile, violence and the loss of access to electoral politics.

Inventing populism

Before Thaksin's 2001 electoral victory at the head of the TRT, 'populism' was a word rarely used in Thailand. There had been some media uses of 'populism' and 'populist' in earlier decades and some Western scholars had used the terms to describe aspects of electoral politics (Laothamatas, 2006: 77–78). Yet so barren was the political ground for populism that the term itself is a recent innovation in the Thai language (Phongpaichit and Baker, 2008: 65).

After Thaksin formed TRT in 1998 and developed an electoral platform, some media and academics described Thaksin's core policies as populist – farmer debt moratorium, soft loans for communities, and universal health care.² The adoption of the term into Thai is attributed to two newspaper articles by academic Kasian Tejapira, in January and February 2001. His first article used the English word 'populism' converted to Thai as *poppiewlit*. In the second article, however, Kasian adopted a Thai word, *prachaniyom* (literally, *pracha*: the people/citizens, *niyom*: popular). In other words, *prachaniyom* was lexically invented for Thaksin's Thailand (Laothamatas, 2004: 76–81).

In the literature on Thaksin and populism, the work of Phongpaichit and Baker (2002, 2005, 2008) has been most influential. In their 2002 paper, Phongpaichit and Baker concentrated on TRT's support for big business, its appeals to small and medium-sized entrepreneurs and to 'rural discontents'. When they identify Thaksin with a 'pluto-populist alliance between rich and poor' they add that this is 'glued together by nationalism', and is neither pro-labour nor pro-rural. They

view the Thaksin of this time as pro-business and his politics as a variation of Thailand's 'money politics' (Phongpaichit and Baker, 2002: 11–12).

As Thaksin's period in office extended, Phongpaichit and Baker (2005) argued that a 'business populism' developed. They recognized that 'at its core', Thaksin's government 'represents a coalition of big-business interests that has adopted a kind of 'populism on demand' (meaning that Thaksin has responded to popular demand for certain kinds of policies) (Phongpaichit and Baker, 2005: 58–59). They identify this with Latin American 'neopopulism' and argue that Thaksin had 'learned of populism's vast appeal' and adopted both the policies and rhetoric of populism (Phongpaichit and Baker, 2005: 63). This involved 'demands for redistributionist economic and social policies and a political style that aggressively rejects ideology, old political leadership and the liberal emphasis' of democratic politics (Phongpaichit and Baker, 2005: 68).

Following Thaksin's ousting in 2006, Phongpaichit and Baker (2008: 63) reassessed 'Thaksin's populism'. They argue that Thaksin's populism had evolved, with considerable social demand for his policies, and involved the projection of a particular relationship between Thaksin and his supporters. They asserted that by the 2005 election campaign, 'Thaksin's populism had expanded beyond a policy platform into a distinctly new form of politics', linking him as an authoritarian leader to his supporters (Phongpaichit and Baker, 2008: 68). They further argued that Thaksin's 'embrace of populism gave him a means to justify ... authoritarianism as an alternative to the liberal model of democracy' (Phongpaichit and Baker, 2008: 70).

It is easy to agree with Phongpaichit and Baker (2008) when they assert that Thaksin was not a populist when he led his TRT Party in 1998; neither his business career nor his early politics displayed a penchant for populism.³ However, it is necessary to develop and extend Phongpaichit and Baker's approach in four areas. First, rather than viewing Thaksin's populism as a variant form (business populism or neopopulism), this article identifies several core characteristics of political populism and examines how Thaksin's political 'career path' came to accommodate these characteristics. Second, this article acknowledges the emphasis Phongpaichit and Baker placed on the socio-economic underpinnings of Thaksin's political rise, but in locating the social bases of populism, it places emphasis on class conflict. Third, in empirical terms, it takes Phongpaichit and Baker's identification of a social demand for populist policies further by considering it a political demand that helped launch a political movement. This suggests a relationship between leader and masses in populist politics that acknowledges the power of the masses. Fourth, rather than conflating authoritarianism and populism, this article suggests that populism may be politically progressive.

To make these points, it is necessary to outline the social bases and characteristics of populism as a framework for assessing Thaksin's populism.

Populism: Characteristics and social bases

While debate continues regarding the characteristics of populism, a commonly agreed element is an identification of 'the people' stressing vertical cleavages/linkages versus a variously conceived and constructed 'other'. 'The people' are portrayed as having been betrayed, deceived or exploited, often by an elite or by the *status quo* of the social, political and economic order. The result is that populists and their supporters declare the existing order in need of change (Mudde, 2004). It is also widely accepted that populism and populists challenge 'the system'. Often a system's shortcomings are associated with the identification of the elite's betrayal or exploitation. This challenge can confront various political regimes, although the literature generally views it as pathological for representative democracy (see Kaltwasser, 2012). These characteristics of populism provide a sufficient basis for examining Thaksin's populism.

It is also necessary to consider the social and political environment for populism's emergence. Deiwiks (2009: 3) identifies three conditions: first, structural circumstances and/or real or constructed crises produce cleavages and disadvantage for particular groups; second, the identification by particular subaltern groups of opaqueness in political institutions or the political system; and third, the charisma of leaders. As several analysts have noted, a leader's charisma is not necessarily a *cause* of populism but may be a result of political struggle or structural conditions (see Mudde, 2004: 544–545). Each of these conditions will be examined for the case of Thaksin.

These elements of populism and the conditions for its emergence make it necessary to consider the shifting social bases of populism and locate these within key periods of significant social and economic transformation. The recent global rise of populist parties and movements is often linked with changes to regulatory regimes and transformations in product, capital and labour markets prompted by liberalization and privatization. Neoliberal globalization has de-centred production networks, emphasizing employment mobility and flexibility (Brenner et al., 2010). Thus, precarious work, associated with contracting, part-time, self-employed, casual, and outsourced labour, has expanded. As the centre of global production has shifted from the West to Asia, these changes have been far-reaching, resulting in considerable social fragmentation.

As will be indicated below, this perspective allows an understanding of how, and under what circumstances, social heterogeneity and fragmentation provided an environment for the rise of populism in Thailand. Here, Oxhorn's (1998) conception of social mobilization embracing 'multi-class coalitions' tapping the frustrations of lower classes and produced by various inequalities is also revealing.

As indicated in the Introduction to this issue, populism is connected to struggles over the prevailing distribution of economic and political power (Hadiz and Chryssogelos, 2017). By considering populist politics as a response to concrete problems associated with development processes reproducing social, economic and political marginalization, the notion that populism is simply a façade for political manipulation is called into question.

A distinction between progressive and reactionary populisms raises the issue of identity. In battling elites, populists often seek to identify shared experiences of injustice. In this context, populism offers opportunities for cross-class coalitions, whether politically progressive or regressive, and makes claims on entrenched elites for political inclusion, institutional reform and welfare innovation (see Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2012). While shared identity can revolve around experiences of injustice and progressive attention to welfare and equality, it can also result in a dangerous rightist politics of nationalism, racism and extremism.

Having set out what I argue are the essential characteristics of populism and the factors giving rise to it, I will now apply this analysis to the nature of Thaksin's populism.

Inequality and fragmentation

Thaksin and his TRT were first elected to government in January 2001 and were re-elected in February 2005. Both elections were landslide victories. Pro-Thaksin parties also won elections in 2007 and 2011; no other party has won an election in Thailand since 2001. Thaksin and the TRT initially came to power after periods of both political and economic crisis (see Hewison, 2004; Phongpaichit and Baker, 2008).

In the second half of the 20th century, Thailand experienced high rates of economic growth. It was the capitalist class that captured a disproportionate share of the gains, with the ratio of incomes held by the top 20% growing from over six times that of the bottom 20% in the 1960s to 12 times higher by the mid-1980s. This pattern of inequality is also reproduced in measures of wealth and

land ownership (Phongpaichit, 2016). At the same time, some trickle down did reduce poverty but inequality remained high.

Economic and political inequalities are mutually reinforcing conditions resulting in a political system that is exclusionary and dominated by elites and authoritarian politics. This political and economic arrangement incubated the expansion of the capitalist and middle classes.

From the 1960s to the present, the highest rates of absolute poverty have been concentrated in rural areas and especially in the North and the Northeast regions. By 2013, average incomes in the North and Northeast were just 44.6% of Bangkok's 43,058 baht (National Statistical Office, 2014). The state did little to alleviate poverty and high inequality (Hewison, 2014). Even in 2012, three-quarters of the state's expenditure was concentrated on Bangkok and adjacent provinces (The Economist, 2016).

Other data shed more light on inequality. First, the share of wages in factor incomes (a measure of income distribution between capital and non-capital) has been highly skewed to capital for a very long period. Second, since 1960, productivity increases by labour have largely accrued to capital through increased profits (Mounier and Charoenloet, 2010). Until late 2011, stagnating or declining real wages were a part of this pattern, especially in the Northeast and North.⁴ This brief account pinpoints a pattern of poverty and low incomes concentrated in the north and north-eastern regions where Thaksin and TRT were to thrive politically.

As noted, poverty decreased along with economic diversification and industrialization. These processes have been associated with employment changes as large numbers moved out of the agricultural sector and into industry, services and a large informal sector. They also resulted in increasing fragmentation. From 1980 to 2010 the number employed in the informal sector has increased from about 17.3 million to 24.1 million, with percentage increases since 2000. Approximately two-thirds of informal employment is in the agricultural sector, where land ownership has also become increasingly unequal (Hewison and Tularak, 2013).

Responses to crisis

Thaksin's 2001 election victory occurred in a context where Thailand had faced both political and economic crises. In politics, the military had seized power in 1991, but a civilian uprising in May 1992 rejected the military's attempt to control electoral politics and sent the armed forces back to their barracks (Ockey, 2004: 164–170). This temporary political isolation of the military provided the space for civilian leaders to promote political reform.

The major piece in this reform agenda was the 1997 Constitution. Debates over the Constitution between conservatives, politicians, civil society organizations and intellectuals saw the charter enhance opportunities for political participation while mandating a stronger executive and party system. Often called the 'People's Constitution', this term denotes two striking elements of its drafting: first, the drafting assembly included some from outside the Bangkok elite; and second, there was public consultation on the draft document (McCargo, 2002: 9). The resulting document reflected optimism and hope for electoral democracy, despite rejecting many progressive proposals. Thaksin was to be the only prime minister elected under this Constitution.

The economic crisis took place in 1997–1998 and when TRT was first elected the economy was still struggling, having been hit by increases in absolute poverty, unemployment, under-employment and inequality and reduced real wages (Hewison, 2002). The crisis had also resulted in an extensive restructuring of ownership and control in the economy. The devaluation of the baht meant the collapse of many businesses. With a transfer of business ownership to international investors, Thailand's domestic business class was badly shaken.

Not surprisingly, the crisis and a tepid recovery meant considerable public and business class dissatisfaction with the incumbent Democrat Party-led government. It was accused of implementing policies reflecting its economic liberalism and International Monetary Fund (IMF) policy. These policies failed to ease the recession and saw the government accused of kowtowing to the IMF and selling out the country to foreign interests.

One set of responses to the crisis came from an alliance of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), social movements and royalists that was nationalist and localist (Hewison, 2000: 284–288). This backward-looking response emphasized a rural-urban dichotomy, romanticizing an imagined rural community and village-based ‘self-reliance’, demanding a return to village-based self-sufficiency to overcome the crisis. For a time, this nationalist localism gained policy traction, directing attention to the rural population at a time when the media had generally focused on business bankruptcies and urban impacts of the crisis.

These foci were not ignored when the first election campaign since the economic crisis was launched in 2000. To be sure, TRT’s campaign emphasized policies aimed at rescuing the domestic capitalist class, yet to do this the party needed, and received, strong support from rural electorates. As will be discussed below, TRT’s core policies were attractive for this constituency.

The dead weight of the ruling class

Thailand’s ruling class has been quite stable over a long period. The country was never colonized, meaning the monarchy was not seriously challenged by colonial powers and there was no nationalist movement as in other parts of Asia. The royal house prospered until the end of absolutism in 1932, and even after that managed to survive and reassert itself.

The 1932 challenge, an essentially modernist rebellion, was seen off within about 20 years. In alliance with the military and the rising bourgeoisie, the monarchy was re-established politically and economically. The challenge posed by communism was also defeated, this time with US support and investment bolstering the dominant business and political elites. Communism was outlawed and socialists jailed along with communists. Labour organizing was banned for much of the 20th century and students were kept under control in elitist universities.

When parliaments were permitted, various mechanisms ensured decision-making power resided in the military and technocracy or, if necessary, with the king. The ideology of representation for much of the post-1945 period, dubbed ‘Thai-style democracy’, promoted royalism and reserved political power for the elite (Hewison and Kitirianglarp, 2010). This alliance of military, monarchy and bourgeoisie delivered uninterrupted growth and great wealth for the bourgeoisie and the monarchy.

This situation of exploitation, repression, inequality and domination by the military and monarchy could have been fertile ground for subaltern restlessness and the rise of populism. Yet there was no populist uprising. There were some disgruntled military colonels bridling against oligarchs (Sayam mai, 1985), but there were no firebrands to whip up populist movements. Subaltern challenges were defeated during Cold War counterinsurgency and in periods of military crackdowns. Thus, peasants and workers were quiescent, with many of their leaders repressed, jailed or killed in the 1960s and 1970s (Haberkorn, 2011). When electoral politics were permitted, the constitutional arrangements were such that there was no evident reward for politicians making calls to the people in other than highly particularistic ways.

In other words, the dead weight of elite domination left little space for populist rhetoric, policies or practice. However, this situation was to change dramatically following the political rise of Thaksin.

Reinventing electoral politics

As noted above, the *potential* appeal of populism grew during and immediately following the economic crisis. Phongpaichit and Baker (2002: 6–7) point to the emergence of rural dissidence, while labour disputes also increased (Brown et al., 2002: 28). Despite the advances of the 1997 Constitution, the political sphere continued to exclude the subaltern classes.

Thaksin's TRT won in 2001 for a combination of reasons. First, it promised alternative policies to the Democrat Party's neo-liberalism, while redressing the grievances of domestic capitalists. Second, the party connected with the broader electorate and offered policies attractive to the poor and rural dwellers. To attract rural voters, Thaksin brought in grassroots-connected advisers who came with ideas about poverty reduction and local-level concerns. These resulted in the policies such as a farmer debt moratorium, soft loans for communities and universal health care that came to be labelled 'populist'. Third, TRT emphasized inclusiveness. Business, rural voters, intellectuals and civil society leaders became attuned to TRT's mildly nationalist rhetoric (see Hewison, 2004: 514–518; Phongpaichit and Baker, 2009: 80–82).

This was perceptive electioneering, but not populism. Thaksin used business methods to find out what the political 'market' wanted. Surveys and focus groups were important in developing policies and for differentiating TRT's political 'brand' (Phongpaichit and Baker, 2009: 63–80). In sum, these policies were national in scope, some were universalist, and they dealt with the negative impacts of the crisis for domestic business. For the first time, a Thai political party developed policies addressing national issues and moved away from particularistic pork barrelling. Surprising many, Thaksin's government also delivered on its campaign promises. Delivering what he had promised was essential to maintain political momentum and deliver an economic stimulus.

Rather than populism, TRT's electoral platform amounted to a new social contract (Hewison, 2004). To rescue the domestic business class, TRT needed the support of rural voters. Hence TRT policies offered social welfare, income support and ideas about how the poor might get ahead. No past government had ever taken interest in the masses in such a positive way. In a highly unequal society, this was innovative and proved popular. Whatever they were called, Thaksin's policies delivered immense personal popularity, a dominant party, a recovering economy and more promises to the poor for the 2005 election.

Speaking 'populist'

In his 2000–2001 electoral campaigning, Thaksin did not use populist political rhetoric. He did speak *to* rural people, identifying them as part of the electorate, but did not regularly seek to speak *for* the rural and downtrodden. However, as political opposition increased following his election, Thaksin took to using his electoral mandate as a sign of his role as a leader of the voters and made some calls to 'the people' to support him and his government.

Some commentators point to decisions by the National Counter-Corruption Commission (NCCC) in December 2000 and the Constitutional Court in 2001 as markers of Thaksin's turn to 'the people' (see Pongsudhirak, 2012). The NCCC indicted Thaksin for concealing his assets when briefly appointed deputy premier in 1997. There was tremendous political pressure on Constitutional Court judges to acquit Thaksin, who trumpeted his huge election victory and mobilized supporters. Following his acquittal by the Constitutional Court in early August 2001, Thaksin declared:

It's strange that the leader who was [elected]... by 11 million people had to bow to the ruling of the NCCC and the verdict of the Constitutional Court, ... composed only of appointed commissioners and judges, whom people did not have a chance to choose' (*Bangkok Post*, 5 August 2001).

Yet a closer reading of Thaksin's developing rhetoric suggests an arguably more significant origin for what was to become Thaksin's populism. Immediately after the election Thaksin found TRT's policies under attack from technocrats, NGOs, academics and the media. His party's 'populist policies' were attacked as unattainable dreams, too expensive and threatening the romanticized self-reliance of villagers (see *Matichon*, 9–14 January 2001; *Nation*, 11 January–6 February 2001).

Thaksin responded to these attacks, asserting that, unlike his critics, he understood the poor and underprivileged. Critics took this as arrogance and the beginning of a 'personality cult' (*Far Eastern Economic Review*, 16 August 2001). At the end of January 2001, Thaksin talked about the populist label, opining: 'Perhaps it's half true that we are following a populist strategy...' (*Bangkok Post*, 30 January 2001). When he was inaugurated as prime minister Thaksin stated:

My government will work tirelessly and honestly, and will be devoted to ... improving the welfare of the Thai people. My decisions, even though they cannot please all 61 million Thais, will be based on what is best for the majority... (*Thai Rath*, 6 February 2001).

If this was mildly populist rhetoric, it is also true that Thaksin was reluctant to adopt the populist mantle. Various rejecting the label or half-heartedly accepting it, he repeatedly explained that his economic and social policies were 'citizen-centred and people-focussed.' In one speech, he stated: 'My emphasis on strengthening the grassroots is not some cynical populist ploy to win votes, but an effort to empower our country's most important asset, its people, so that they can take charge of their own lives.' Thaksin complained his critics misunderstood his policies, unfairly dismissing them 'with contempt, a[s] populist policy.' Thaksin was left 'bemused. The people like it [his policies] because they find it beneficial. So if they like the policy and benefit from it, what's wrong?' (Shinawatra, 2003: 2) He went further:

What I have done ... is no more than what the people ... want and deserve.... What I have done is not just for the recovery of the economy. What I have done is to aim at eliminating poverty ... by ... 2009. What I have done is to aim at making the Thai people free from want and free from fear.... I am a man who puts everything that is in me into my efforts and attempts for the betterment of my fellow countrymen.... Whatever you wish to call it, this is the policy that I believe is best for Thailand (*Bangkok Post*, 9 September 2003).

While Thaksin's detractors considered him a populist, his policies accelerated economic recovery. By 2004, sometimes called 'Thaksinomics' and 'Keynesian' rather than simply 'populist', TRT's policies saw the country repay its IMF loans ahead of schedule and poverty and unemployment reduced. There was a widely held perception that Thaksin had both promised and delivered, boosting his political appeal, as shown in his 2005 re-election where TRT's victory was huge, with 61% of the vote, resulting in 75% of the seats.⁵

Meanwhile, for Thaksin's opponents, 'populism' was a term of political abuse. It was seamlessly linked by opponents to a litany of charges revolving around nepotism and corruption. A listing of the ills and evils attributed to 'populist' policies is revealing and contradictory. TRT's policies were described as: creating a 'welfare state' or being insufficiently welfarist; fostering dependence, reducing self-reliance and self-sufficiency whereby poor citizens were clients queuing up to receive handouts from TRT; being too expensive and emptying state coffers; encouraging consumerism and indebtedness, especially in rural areas where villagers were brainwashed and made insatiable consumers under the spell of a government pandering to the undisciplined needs and wants of the masses; making Thaksin too popular, leading to a monopolization of power and a parliamentary dictatorship termed 'Thaksinocracy;' weakening the bureaucracy, technocrats and independent organizations; establishing a populist capitalism to

further the interests of big business while also weakening the market mechanism; providing a front for 'policy corruption' enriching Thaksin's cronies; being unable to help the poor and destitute; and undermining the Constitution.⁶

The point of these sometimes contradictory criticisms is that opponents identified Thaksin with populist policies and those policies with a range of issues around political power, nepotism and corruption (Pinthong, 2004). By the beginning of 2006, these complaints were easily transformed into rally slogans.

Thaksin's populism

As the 2005 election approached, critics seemed confident TRT would lose, with the *Nation* newspaper (8 November 2004) declaring Thaksin's popularity at rock bottom. Thaksin responded by offering more benefits to the poor. In his speeches, Thaksin increasingly reached out to the rural electorate.

In response, critics moved from not just rejecting Thaksin's 'populist' policies to cutting the majoritarian political ground from under him. Before the election, media critics declared that TRT's 'populism' was 'PR-managed, market-researched, airbrushed and professionally scripted', and thus not 'genuine' populism (*Bangkok Post*, 20 December 2004). But critic Thirayuth Boonmee identified a threat to the elite when he worried that TRT's 'populist' policies might mean '[p]eople at the grassroots level will not be passive anymore...'. He predicted they would demand more policies serving their interests (*Matichon*, 20 November 2004). Thaksin's response was indeed to move closer to those who voted for him, campaigning with promises to the poor (Shinawatra, 2005). His re-election reinforced his attachment to the electorate.

Yet his landslide election victory also convinced much of the royalist elite and significant elements of the bourgeoisie to support Thaksin's opponents. This elite opposition became more widespread with the formation of the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD or 'yellow shirts') and its anti-Thaksin mass rallies.⁷ At this point, Thaksin had little choice but to turn to the people who voted for him.

In response, and arguably his first major populist foray, in mid-January 2006, Thaksin undertook a political reality television show, broadcast nationwide. In it, Thaksin visited a poor Northeastern district in Roi-Et province. He stayed five days, residing in a village house, bathing in a crude outhouse, riding motorcycles on dusty roads, hugging old ladies and 'solving' village problems on the spot. In this, Thaksin was relying on government position, bureaucracy and party organization for bolstering his and TRT's support. His opposition dismissed Thaksin's sortie into village life as a political stunt. Rural people, however, appeared to welcome his intervention and Thaksin enjoyed his grassroots popularity.

As anti-Thaksin demonstrations expanded, TRT mounted rallies that brought the people to Thaksin and took Thaksin to his people, his voters. He made several strong speeches, linking his personal and the party's struggle to that of the people, for the establishment of what he now called 'true democracy'. In his speeches, Thaksin increasingly linked himself to his supporters and declared them a democratic bedrock against elite-controlled authoritarianism. Thaksin had identified an 'other'; the Bangkok-centred elite. Clearly, the scaffolding for an identifiably populist leadership was being put in place. Yet Thaksin continued promoting party and policies within the electoral system. Meanwhile, street-based opposition grew and in late 2005 and early 2006, as PAD demonstrators berated Thaksin as a dictator and the media slammed him for making 'an ingenious use of populist policies that pander to the unprincipled wants and needs of the people, complementing his party's advantage of a huge war chest financed by his own fabulous personal wealth' (*Nation*, 21 March 2006).

Significantly, Thaksin's opponents added to the attacks by seeking to undermine electoral politics. They charged that elections do not define democracy and can lead to majoritarianism. Electoral politics was also said to weaken democracy through vote buying and attracting votes through populist policies. Rural voters, considered responsible for delivering parliamentary power to Thaksin, were chastised as duped, bought and ignorant. As one activist/journalist explained, the:

... pro-Thaksin camp, comprised of farmers and villagers from the country's poorest regions ... are determined to keep whatever they have gained from ... populist excess. To them, the health schemes, village funds and debt moratoriums are lifesavers. They obviously have no idea of the dire consequences of such mammoth spending... (*Nation*, 27 March 2006).

With Thaksin trumpeting his electoral majority, his opponents came to reject elections as a source of legitimacy. While Thaksin was moving closer to a populist politics, his response to those attacking him was to re-emphasize electoral politics. Speaking in the United States a day before his overthrow, Thaksin expressed his connection to the people through his policies and affirmed the value of democracy:

As someone who comes from the provinces, I am acutely conscious that democracy must serve the needs of the rural poor as surely as it does the urban elite and for all to benefit from growth. As such, the bottom line for all government programs is to reduce expenditures for the people, generate income, and extend opportunities.... [W]e have delivered on that promise (Council on Foreign Relations, 2006).

Thaksin proclaimed:

Empowering the regions has moved Thai democracy to a new level. Putting more decisions in the hands of ordinary people is certainly a fundamental component of democracy.... While many will argue about whether economic reforms drive political reforms or vice versa, I believe that both are essential (Council on Foreign Relations, 2006).

On 19 September 2006, the military ousted Thaksin. The coup, its rejection of the 1997 Constitution and of parliamentary politics, became the final push for Thaksin and his supporters to adopt a political strategy that was identifiably populist.

Thaksin and the political need for populism

Thaksin's ouster removed a legitimacy based in elections and parliamentary politics. Indeed, the constitutional basis of electoral politics was scrapped and Thaksin went into exile. The junta set about rewriting the political rules, seeking to prevent Thaksin returning to power. His party base was neutered by military repression and the courts. Thaksin was lost as a parliamentary and party leader and his party was forced to dissolve, with 111 party officials and former members of parliament banned from politics for five years.

Thaksin's recourse was to adopt populist rhetoric and politics, building on the scaffolding put in place when he faced opposition in 2005 and early 2006. After an associated political party won an election in 2007, and was then booted out in a constitutional coup, the red shirt movement developed as Thaksin's political base.⁸ He most clearly expressed his populist position when speaking after two major pro-Thaksin uprisings, in 2009 and 2010, stating:

Providing opportunities for the poor is like invigorating your body. To be strong, you need to invigorate the dying cells. That was what I tried to do. But one day, the military coup took away everything, and

people chose to rise against it. When people were hungry, democracy was only for the elite. But now, people have filled their stomachs. And they want more. But the elite don't want change that will affect their already happy lives.

I am a political victim here, because the elite saw that I'm the one who pushed for democracy. I represent the working class people from rural area[s] (*Korea JoongAng Daily*, 21 August 2012).

In terms of the markers of populism outlined above, it is clear Thaksin became identifiably populist following the 2006 coup. For one thing, TRT was dead as a formal political institution, reincarnating as a red shirt political movement that came to be known officially as the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD). This movement was broader than TRT and developed media and street politics to defend 'democracy against dictatorship'. Initially, this was about restoring electoral politics and lauded 'those who love democracy' over military repression and elite rule, with red shirts identifying their movement as representing 'the people'. In this sense, where Phongpaichit and Baker (2008) identified the populist Thaksin as authoritarian, the rise of the red shirt movement arguably represented a more democratic politics, and Thaksin was forced to adopt their politics, at least in his populist rhetoric.

The red shirts distinguished between the people as '*phrai*' (or commoners), engaged in a struggle with an 'other' identified as the '*amart*' (or aristocrats) who ruled Thailand and maintained economic and political inequality. The *phrai* had been betrayed, deceived and oppressed by an exploitative and conservative elite. When the red shirts faced the military's guns, they attacked this domination, exploitation and inequality. Red shirt rhetoric included a notion that the rural poor were different from their opponents. While this nascent identity politics was not developed, there was talk of ethnic difference and separatism in the Northern and Northeastern red shirt strongholds where TRT had been politically dominant.⁹

While he was of the elite, many red shirts saw Thaksin as their political representative and leader. His policies might have aided the wealthy, but he had shown a concern for the poor and used state resources to support them. However, apart from a brief period in 2008, Thaksin has been in exile and has been as much a follower of the red shirts as they were his followers.

In the face of efforts to re-embed a conservative politics that devalued elections and rejected redistributive policies, red shirts used emotive shibboleths to challenge hierarchies founded in inequality and authoritarianism, attacking members of the king's Privy Council and others of the *amart*. The movement's rhetoric – and that of Thaksin – came to emphasize fairness, equality, justice and electoral democracy. This was seen in the UDD's (2010: 5) call for 'a free and just state,' where the 'gap between the rich and the poor is reduced' and decrying the Thailand's situation as being a 'backward country that is totally controlled by conservative oligarchs...'. The UDD, demanding elections, wanted a 'country of free people with national pride, freedom and equality'.

As this populist ideology deepened, both Thaksin and the UDD claimed that opaque political institutions constrained the *phrai* and worked in the interests of the *amart*. Constrained by the draconian *lèse majesté* law the monarchy was seldom criticized. However, red shirts were particularly outspoken on the politicized judiciary, seen as institutionalizing a political bias through 'double standards'. The Constitutional Court was a particular target for its overruling of parliament's mandate on constitutional amendment, for dissolving pro-Thaksin political parties and banning their politicians.

In speaking to red shirt rallies Thaksin phoned in to giant video screens, exhorting his followers to rescue democracy and return him to power. Appealing to red shirts and reflecting their demands, Thaksin declared several times that he wanted a 'real democracy, not a sham one'. He called on

those who wanted ‘real democracy to come out and join the protest by his supporters for a “people’s revolution”’. He called on his supporters to mobilize nationwide, in ‘full force,’ to ‘act like a tsunami’ and ‘drive away the aristocracy and make Thailand a complete democracy’. Thaksin proclaimed that the people’s government – his government – had been robbed of its mandate and that it was time to demand it back. He promised to work for the people: ‘If you my countrymen tell me to get back to work, I will do it even though it means hard work.... I will return and tackle the problems. I will do magic for you’ (*Nation*, 1 April 2009). Thaksin had ‘joined’ the red shirts and was using the rhetoric of populism.¹⁰

The election the red shirts wanted came in 2011. The nature of electoral politics had been changed by red shirt activism. Thaksin’s sister, Yingluck, won easily, with Thaksin regularly calling in and the red shirts operating as a mass movement for the Pheu Thai Party, which rolled out a suite of populist policies. Even opposing party policies were influenced by the populism that had sprung from the red shirt attention to the *phrai*.

Yingluck and Pheu Thai won a spectacular victory. Yet, the elite were not done, and another coup resulted in May 2014. The new junta proceeded to destroy the red shirt movement and to change the political rules to prevent another Thaksin-like figure from ruling. It sought to ‘ban’ populist policies (*Bangkok Post*, 16 March 2016).

Conclusion

In power, Thaksin was a reluctant populist. The scaffolding for populism was constructed as Thaksin came under opposition attack, until he was overthrown. Despite his authoritarian tendencies, while he was winning elections, Thaksin emphasized party and electoral politics. The deep cleavages in Thai society provided a fertile ground for populism, but the rise of Thaksin saw massive electoral support for him. Thaksin’s electoral base was established when TRT offered universalist policies and support for the downtrodden.

Thaksin had tended to consider his supporters party members, voters and constituents. He did not adopt all of the trappings of political populism until the 2006 coup and his subsequent political banishment meant the loss of his party. The repeated frustration of pro-Thaksin parties saw him corralled into the adoption of populist politics and developing a reliance on a mass movement. That mass movement’s embrace of populism was a political position demanding an electoral politics that would challenge the control of an elite representing political and economic inequality.

Thaksin’s populism and his supporters’ demands for electoral democracy to be institutionalized were so threatening to the military and other elements of the elite that there was a second coup in May 2014 that was anti-democratic and ‘anti-populist’.

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Notes

1. Red shirts were a broad and diverse mass movement that emerged after the 2006 coup, promoting democracy. While officially separate, the movement came to be associated with Thaksin Shinawatra and repeated calls for a return to electoral politics.

2. This article cannot provide details of these policies, most of which have been widely reviewed elsewhere (see, for example, Hewison, 2004; Selway, 2011).
3. Thaksin was an elite insider when TRT was elected in 2001. Like most of Thailand's elite, he had Chinese ethnicity, but as a fourth-generation Sino-Thai, his ethnicity did not mark him as an outsider. His wealth had been created through his connections within the economic and bureaucratic elites and the extraordinary growth of the 1980s and early 1990s. Hugely wealthy by the mid-1990s, Thaksin participated in three previous governments as a minister and had headed a small party (Palang Dhamma). These brief excursions left little impression and the two major studies of Thaksin's rise give little attention to these events (McCargo and Pathamanand, 2005; Phongpaichit and Baker, 2009). It was the formation of TRT that heralded Thaksin's political rise.
4. In late 2011, the Yingluck Shinawatra government announced a substantial increase to the minimum wage for 2012. This, along with the expansion of state-funded health and education associated with the first Thaksin government, may account for a downtick in inequality in recent years (Phongpaichit, 2016).
5. The only region where TRT did not increase its seats was the South. In the provinces close to the Malaysian border, a Muslim majority area, Thaksin's policies on a long-running insurgency were rejected as unleashing violence (McCargo, 2008). In the Buddhist-dominated provinces further north on the peninsula, the Democrat Party established its dominance through political families, patronage and vote-buying (Askew, 2008).
6. This listing is drawn from several sources: political rallies, newspapers and magazines of the period and books including Anek Laothamatas (2006) and a series of books initially edited by Chirmsak Pinthong.
7. The falling out between Thaksin and the royalist elite and powerful elements of the bourgeoisie in 2005 and 2006 is a longer story than can be considered here. Various explanations suggest a clash of elites and control over politics and economy (Schmidt, 2007). Evidence of the falling out is found in WikiLeaks cables – see those dated 7 December 2005, 9 March, 7 July, 6 September, 15 September and 21 September 2006.
8. Pro-Thaksin parties won election in 2007 and 2011. In 2011, the red shirt movement was critical for the Pheu Thai Party's victory.
9. The majority of people in these regions speak languages closer to that spoken in Laos. Both areas were only fully incorporated into the Thai state in the 19th and 20th centuries.
10. There was violence. In April 2009 and again in April–May 2010, red shirt rallies were cleared by armed troops. In 2010, more than 100 were killed, thousands injured and buildings were burned. These events remain contested. See conflicting accounts in Amsterdam and Peroff (n.d.) and Human Rights Watch (2011).

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