

Thai politics beyond the 2006 coup

Pasuk Phongpaichit

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The keywords of political debate of the 1990s were terms like civil society, rights and freedoms, participation, and reform. By contrast, the keywords of the 2000s have included authoritarianism, exclusion, coup, nominee, security, violence, and reconciliation. What has happened, and where will this lead?

Whether we like it or not, Thaksin's premiership (2001-6) has brought out a deep division in Thai society. On the one hand, the mass electorate embraced him as their leader and gave him three unprecedented election victories. On the other hand, old elites rejected him for being authoritarian, for using political power to enrich his family and cronies, and for threatening major long-standing institutions through his headlong pursuit of rapid change.

Thaksin's populism

The core of this division is Thaksin's so-called "populism." It's important to understand where this came from. When he rose to power, Thaksin showed no real interest in the mass. He became a popular leader over the following years because of the demand for such a leader.

This demand was a function of the social structure and politicization. The accompanying diagram provides a sketch of Thai society in the 2000s. The formal working class – meaning those with relatively permanent jobs in enterprises of some scale – is very small, around 8 percent of the working population. The middle class, meaning anyone with a white-collar job including bureaucrats, professionals, and managers is around 15 percent.

The majority of the society, about 2/3rds of the workforce, are in agriculture or the urban informal sector – vendors, mom-and-pop stores, services, small enterprises, illegal businesses, and a big casual workforce floating between many jobs. People move back and forth between agriculture and the urban informal sector. Remittances from urban informal work subsidise faltering agricultural incomes. Together these two groups form the "informal mass." They are outside the state legal structure and social protection, and they dominate the electorate.

For this informal mass, the financial crisis of 1997 was a key moment of politicization. They did not cause the crisis but bore much of the impact (especially through unemployment),

and received no relief. The resentment, and resulting politicization, led to a wave of demonstrations, such as for debt relief, over 1998-9.

This wave coincided with Thaksin's bid for political power. As a wealthy businessman, he was an unlikely candidate to become a populist leader. But he became more intensely a populist over the next five years – as he realized the potential of the informal mass as a base of popular electoral support.

First, he offered social policies which were *universal* in scope (e.g., cheap health care for *everybody*) and thus appealed to the informal mass which is usually exempted from formal welfare schemes. Second, he made himself into a public figure which members of the informal mass could imagine they owned, partly by deliberately distancing himself from old elite of bureaucrats, politicians, and intellectuals. Third, he claimed that he was the mechanism which translated the will of the people into action by the state, overriding democratic principles, judicial process, and the rule-of-law on grounds that these principles had never benefited the ordinary people.

The 2006 coup

Thaksin had politicized the gaping division in Thai society – between the urban elite and the great informal mass – which had been developing over the past half century of development. The leaders of the coup explicitly cited this division as one of the four justifications for the coup. This populist trend has frightened the ruling elites, the military and a large segment of the middle class. These three elements joined hands in the coup of September 2006.

The army provided the force. The ruling elites provided traditional legitimation. The middle class gave support *in public space*. Even though the middle class is a minority, it shapes and dominates the public space in which politics is debated. In this space, Thaksin was condemned as a demon, and the coup was given a warm welcome.

The crucial point for understanding the participation by the ruling elites and army is to realize that 2006 is actually one point in a sequence going back to the coups of 1947, 1957, and 1976. In all these four events, the army and royalists moved *in alliance* to eject an elected government on grounds that the elected government was too weak, too strong, too corrupt, too disrespectful of the monarchy, or too something else.

In 2006, the army had a special reason to participate. Thaksin had been trying to bring the army under his personal control. The old guard in the military and a lot of their upcoming subordinates resented this. The army also saw an opportunity to gain redemption for the army's role in 1992, which had reduced their status so dramatically. The military had long

wanted to regain some of its former prominence, and the opportunity to overthrow Thaksin gave them the chance.

The middle class initially welcomed Thaksin in 2001 as a leader to continue the modernization reforms begun in the 1990s. Their support held up for four years, but in 2005, they turned against him in a violent and highly emotional way. The middle class had three fears: first, that it was dangerous to have a state dominated by a clique of the biggest and rather corrupt business interests; second, that they would have to pay for Thaksin's populism through increased taxes and the resulting economic disorder; and third, that Thaksin's formula – an alliance of big money and big numbers - would make the middle class politically irrelevant.

What next?

The best guide is history.

The alignment of social forces around the 2006 coup is similar to that around the coup of 1976. On one side are the ruling elites, army, and urban middle class. On the other is the rest, with a strong rural weightage. In both 1976 and 2006, the coup was a reaction against a political challenge with its centre of gravity in the countryside. In 1976, Bangkok felt threatened by a Maoist insurgency, a peasant movement, and a student movement which sympathized with rural demands. In 2006, Bangkok again felt threatened, but this time by a political leader and political party which had built unprecedented support in the rural areas of the north and the northeast by delivering a range of populist program, and promising more.

After 1976, the establishment solution was a formula of “managed democracy” with three main parts: constitutional engineering to produce a system that was democratic in form but insulated against the risk of mass takeover; military oversight of political activity from top to bottom; and a public campaign for national unity around the monarchy. All these three parts are seen again in 2006.

The 2007 draft constitution deliberately sets out to weaken the prime minister and the political parties. It installs a semi-appointed senate to serve as a conservative deadweight on the parliament. It aims for a return to the fluid coalition politics of the 1980s and 1990s. The Internal Security Bill gives massive powers to the army chief to oversee politics from top to bottom. The military has tried desperately to undermine support for Thaksin using old-fashioned methods of disruption and intimidation.

This strategy of ‘managed democracy’ will not be as easy as in the post 1976 period, because of the large changes over the intervening thirty years. Thailand's globalised economy is incompatible with military rule. The 1985-95 boom raised income levels, and multiplied

the number of interests that are promoted or protected through political actions. Since the early 1980s, elections have become established for parliament and later for local government. There is a dense pyramid of electoral organization extending down from MPs through local government heads to village canvassers. Many have benefited from electoral democracy. The attempt to 'manage democracy' might fail completely, unless it is flexible. Many people are unhappy about the 2007 draft constitution, and the attempt to pass the internal security bill. Civil society groups have opposed the current army chief's ambitions to become the next prime minister. Many in the informal mass feel Thaksin and TRT have been martyred. These resentments can be explosive.

From exclusion to inclusion

Thaksin's populism, the coup, and "managed democracy" are all strategies to exclude opponents from the democratic process. Thaksin hijacked the constitution in order to neutralise opponents to his political ambitions. The coup tore up the constitution in order to undermine Thaksin's massive electoral support. The 2007 constitution is written with the single-minded aim to prevent the return of Thaksin and the social forces he has come to represent.

Politics will only become stable when the political system reflects and accommodates all the important social forces and political aspirations in the society. Competitive strategies of exclusion will only add to social division and political tension. Democracy succeeds in societies where enough of the major social forces come to realize that elections, parliaments, and public debate (for all their messy faults) are better ways to resolve the conflicts in society than power, repression, exclusion, and violence. In such societies, everyone agrees to accept a set of rules and institutions, and to play within them, rather than trying to subvert the rules or tear them up at the first opportunity.

The first step towards such a stable system has to be an inclusive procedure for writing the rules. Whatever faults the resulting charter had, the 1997 process at least was an attempt at such an inclusive procedure. The 2007 process was not and as such will inevitably be a false start.

It is time to aim for an inclusive politics. Perhaps the most difficult task in Thai politics now is how to convince the triple alliance behind the coup of 2006 to accept a political system which accommodates everybody fairly.