

Contemporary Thailand: Local Culture and/or the Manner of Failure

Siam entered the modern world via a foreign-inspired conservative revolution from above. In reaction to the arrival in the region of powerful foreign traders, the elite inaugurated a top-down process of reform designed to accommodate the demands of foreigners whilst preserving local patterns of power and, so far as possible, local forms of life. In 1933, the army staged a coup, abolished the absolute monarchy, invented the Thai nation and thus Thailand and began a programme of reform, unfortunately interrupted by war after which the country, now lodged in the American sphere and acting in line with their demands, in particular the spillover of cold war conflicts in neighbouring countries, experienced a series of military coups. Once again the line of development was conceived in top-down terms, as change should not threaten the status quo. Yet progress has taken place. And whilst it has been slow, it has been effective as new social forces have emerged amongst provincial elites and grass-roots citizens, and they are looking for a political space within the system. The impact of the 1997 financial crisis led to a new constitution and offered a chance for a new politics, but the old elites resist. The twenty-first century has seen two recent coups as the traditional elite cling to their privileged status. It

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seems that the unfolding shift to the modern world is blocked, or it may be that the current pattern is the form of the modern world in Thailand.

As the British assembled their state-empire through the nineteenth century, they organized a series of trading centres that served to draw territories into the ambit of the system and to link them to the metropolitan core. The state-empire system grew as a ragged accumulation of bases, associated territories and trans-global linkages.¹ The system also grew as a result of successfully deployed violence: thus, in Asia, the British gained access to those princely territories that were in time to become India as a result of the military victory at the Battle of Plassey, and it was not only the local powers that lost out, but also the French, and South Asia thereafter moved into the ambit of the British. The sub-continent provided jumping-off points for further expansion to the east, and in time there were more bases (and further conflicts), which took the form of a series of port cities, new or remade: George Town, 1786; Malacca, 1786; Singapore, 1819; Labuan, 1846; Hong Kong, 1841; Shanghai, 1845; and Bangkok 1855.

In the area of mainland Southeast Asia, the British and French competed for influence with existing local country powers or mandala states,² and as these exchanges unfolded, the French were to lay claim to formal control of a large swathe of the area, creating their colony of Indo-China, whilst the British established a trading relationship with the Siamese kingdom centred on the Chao Phroya River. Siam served as a tacitly agreed buffer state between the state-empire spheres of the French and the British, and this was the particular context—in all its economic, social, cultural and political detail—within which the Siamese polity undertook its own shift to the modern world. It took the initial form of a conservative, defensive strategy of top-down reform, and variants of this strategy of response to the challenges thrown up by events that have been repeated down the years.

After these initial exchanges the subsequent trajectory of the Siamese and later the Thai, polity can be unpacked as a series of phases: (1) the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century elite-led top-down reform³; (2) the 1930s abolition of the absolute monarchy and the invention of Thailand; (3) the 1940s war-time fascist interregnum; (4) the long post-war era, with the cold war American supported local dominance of the military, the bureaucracy and (in time) the monarchy; (5) the late

twentieth-century shifts in patterns of domestic power (economic, geographical and [eventually] political); and (6) finally, around the turn of twenty-first century, a period of sharp elite reaction with sustained anti-democratic manoeuvring and two military coups re-asserting elite central control of the polity.

Contemporary Thailand is an elite-dominated polity centred firmly upon the primate city of Bangkok. Political power is concentrated in the hands of an elite which refers to its own character as a means to its legitimation; that is, army and bureaucracy understand themselves to be in the service of the monarchy, and this trio of institutions exemplify moral propriety and responsible concern for the country, in contrast to venal politicians, disreputable business and a foolishly grasping, ill-educated populace with their insistent demands for populist policy. Inside the bubble it all makes sense,⁴ and the borders of the bubble are policed and critics disallowed via a draconian lese majesty law that protects the monarchy, the symbolic core of the system,⁵ so that what there is, is 'modern Thailand'.

There are two ways to read this: first, as exemplifying a species of modernity, that is, 'Thai modernity' or, second, as an instance of a failure of modernity in the face of an entrenched conservative elite. So, *first*, the present situation reveals the nature of the shift to the modern world accomplished by the Siamese/Thai polity. Its fundamental political-cultural logic revolves around the concerns and agendas of the elite—army, bureaucracy and monarchy—what there is, is 'modern Thailand', and so it should not be read as a partial, incomplete or failed version of a model of the modern taken from European experience. Or, *second*, the notion of the shift to the modern world, which frames European social science and provides the basis for both dialogue with scholars from other cultures and the comparative analysis of these cultures (we can and do offer characterizations⁶), embraces ideals of reason, science and progress, and in the political arena, this unpacks (along various tangled lines of debate⁷) as a preference for democracy.⁸ That being so, 'modern Thailand' is in political terms a system that did not or has not yet made it fully into the modern world, and so the question in respect of 'modern Thailand' is the manner of this failure, and here there are two tracks for such reflection: long run, how did the polity get to where it is now; and short run, what can be said about the repeated actions of the elite, in particular, their recourse to military coups in order to veto political advance.

TOP-DOWN REFORM: SIAMESE ELITE REACTION TO THE DEMANDS OF THE MODERN WORLD⁹

The modern world arrived in the South Asian sub-continent in the form of European traders: Portuguese, Dutch, French and British. The Portuguese arrived early,¹⁰ later the Dutch and the French and British arrived in the early seventeenth century. European traders and their military forces became players in the local political scene—allying with local Sultanates—carving out their own territories. In time, the bulk of the area came to be controlled by the British—as elsewhere in their empire territories, trade and violence went hand in hand. Bases in South Asia provided jumping-off points for further trading ventures in Southeast Asia and thence to China.

The key organization facilitating British trade in the region was the EIC,¹¹ and as with other areas, the early contacts involved relatively few people; however, these small numbers grew, and in the eighteenth century, the sub-continent was the scene of more ambitious activities. The company signed treaties, manoeuvred, embroiled itself in local conflicts and launched wars on its own behalf,¹² and it slowly accumulated considerable power. One key moment came in 1757 at the Battle of Plassey as this opened up much of the sub-continent to the British. The key ports and centres of administration in the east were Calcutta and Madras, and these were the bases for further expansion to the east. The goal was to reach China and so further trade routes were developed. The trade was carried by sea and so depended on available ports. The network of bases included: first, in the Malacca Straits, George Town, Malacca and Singapore; then in the South China Sea, Labuan; in the Gulf of Siam, concessions at Bangkok; and finally these links reached the Qing Empire in Hong Kong, Shanghai and other coastal cities of China.

The chain of port cities that facilitated this trade each had a dual function¹³: they drew their local area into the system (ports had hinterlands available for trade, and these ports intersected with established local trade activities), and they joined the chains of ports and linked them finally to the metropolitan centre, in the case of the British, London. Other modern state-empires functioned in similar ways, European, American and Japanese. These trade ports were crucial to the overall system of state-empires as goods and money plus people and ideas flowed along the networks or logistic chains that they sustained. The British sphere created major trade flows. Opium from Bengal and Patna moved along the chain into Southern China,¹⁴ whilst teas and silks moved the other way and

thence to the metropolitan core. Local areas contributed: at first, assorted tropical or local products, and later, primary product flows, and thus tin and rubber from Malaya to America to feed the canning and car industries. All these were variations on the theme of trade, and over time, the British drew in territory and peoples from South Asia, through Southeast Asia and into the coastal areas and river valleys of China. Other European state-empires followed, and later the Americans, Germans and Japanese.

As noted, the British opened up a series of trading and administrative centres, and some prospered, whilst others failed.¹⁵ Those that prospered both opened up their local hinterland for the demands and opportunities of the modern world (in shorthand, 'development') and created a further link in a chain linking established bases in South Asia via Southeast Asia to the final goal of Qing China. The *first* important link in this chain, after the early success of George Town in Penang, which was established in 1786, was Singapore, which was established in 1818. It was extracted from the surrounding Johor–Riau Sultanate by the expedient of signing a treaty with a disenchanted junior member of the Sultan's royal family. The freshly invented Sultan of Singapore took himself to be co-equal with the British, but he was disabused and soon relocated to the Malay Peninsula. The newly established port was a success, and it facilitated British trade and drew in traders from around the archipelago.¹⁶ The *second* important link in the chain was Hong Kong.¹⁷ And where the establishment of Singapore rested upon political guile and no little trickery, the British seized Hong Kong only after a war against the Qing Empire, a war to facilitate opium sales. The territory was ceded to the British in 1843, and later further adjacent territories were added: Kowloon, after the Second Opium War and the New Territories, after the Qing defeat in the Sino-Japanese War 1894–1895.¹⁸ The route the British took into China was not smooth, but the port of Hong Kong did in time become successful and prosperous. The *third* link in the chain of British trading bases was in Shanghai,¹⁹ and this settlement along with American and French settlements was to become the premier foreign gateway to central China. It was located adjacent to the estuary of the River Yangtze which flowed through the centre of China, and the three foreign settlements functioned in effect as mini-colonies; they enjoyed extra-territorial rights; they organized their own municipal government; they organized the development of the urban area that they controlled. The settlements drew in trade, and the city grew, and by the 1930s, it was the premier modern city of China.

Then, finally, in the context of the creation of these bases and the local and international networks, which they both constituted and served, the last key trade base was Bangkok. The city had been the Royal capital of the Chakri dynasty, and it became the entry point for foreign traders and with them the assorted demands of the modern world. Bangkok became to all intents a colonial port city, albeit without a single colonial ruler and formally, it remained under the rule of the local Siamese kings.²⁰ And as before, the trajectory of the polity can be unpacked in terms of a number of phases: (1) elite top-down modernization, (2) the 1932 coup and the local impact of general crisis, (3) the long post-war pattern and (4) the contemporary pattern (the legatee of all the history).²¹

The Siamese polity was never formally colonized by the incoming European state-empires, in particular, the British and the French, though each held territories adjacent to the country, the British to the south in the Malay Peninsula and to the west in Burma, and the French to the east in Indo-China. It suited both state-empires to leave Siam as a buffer state between their respective spheres; however, both pressed their demands upon the Siamese kingdom, as ever trade was the driving preoccupation. Having established a base in Singapore, the British sought contacts in the region. The British sent trade delegations to Siam, and in the late nineteenth century, these approaches produced the Bowring Treaty 1855, which created a variant on the extra-territorial settlement pattern used elsewhere in the region. The Siamese elite responded creatively, reading and reacting these demands in such a way as to placate powerful foreigners, grasp the logic of the modern world that they exemplified and to sustain their domestic position. The upshot was a conservative, defensive modernizing regime; the elite began the task of remaking Siam from the top downwards.

Prior to the arrival of the modern world, Southeast Asia had been organized in a distinctive fashion. The key was the mandala state²²; it was a system that saw a key settlement that was home to a powerful family surrounded by a number of powerful allied centres; so there were shifting networks of settlements along with their powerful families. The mandala state did not have fixed geographical boundaries as the claims of the core royal family upon allies were not fixed: borders were unclear and loyalties were unclear. The system functioned around sets of specifiable loyalties, and these were buttressed in ceremony and ritual; centres thus waxed and

waned in terms of their power and the long history of the region reveals a number of these centres.²³

In the case of Siam, the primate city was Bangkok,²⁴ which was founded in 1782.²⁵ The city was located on the Chao Phraya River near to the sea, and it was the base of the Chakri royal household, which commanded the support of lesser families. Its core area lay in the valley of the river,²⁶ but its territorial reach was unclear, and in the modern era of maps, the boundaries of the country have shifted several times.²⁷ The economy revolved around agriculture, but there was sub-regional trade and also sea-borne trade with China. It was a part of the Sino-centric regional economy, and the royal rulers encouraged inward migration from China and so the agricultural economy acquired a thriving trading economy. In the nineteenth century, the arrival of Europeans seeking trade relations was a further impetus to Bangkok's growth, but they also represented a threat to the established order, and the local elites were cautious, a stance underscored by the 1842 Opium War. Nonetheless, the decisive change in policy came with the 1855 Bowring Treaty, and Bangkok was plugged into the global trading networks of the British state-empire; the city grew; Siam was drawn into the state-empire system.

Under pressure from the British to reform their administration, the Siamese elite sought to reform their mandala state, and from the middle of the nineteenth century, they introduced the core elements of a modern bureaucratic rational state: a permanent military, a permanent bureaucracy and a centralized tax system; and they made claims to territory, and borders were asserted or established.²⁸ The years up to the end of the nineteenth century saw economic changes as an already existing market in agriculture, and regional trade was supplemented by the linkages via foreign traders to the wider modern economy. Baker and Phongpaichit report that by the time of the Great War, the city of Bangkok was dominated by foreigners, and it was a species of colonial port city, and as its economy grew, so did its role as a capital city.²⁹

Siam entered the modern world in the late nineteenth century. The royal elite inaugurated a programme of conservative reform from above; the formal machinery of a state was assembled; infrastructure was built, port facilities and canals; rice production was facilitated and in the late nineteenth century the country became a primary product exporter of rice, tin and teak. The reform programme was a top-down strategy borrowed colonial models and the dynasty was active through a number of kings until the 1932 coup that abolished the absolute monarchy.³⁰

SIAM BECOMES THAILAND: THE 1932 COUP AND THE ABOLITION OF THE ABSOLUTE MONARCHY

The royal elite continued to oversee the development trajectory of the country through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and they enjoyed considerable success so that the polity prospered; however, economic and social change slowly overwhelmed the established administrative procedures. At which point reforms were made, borrowing from the model of the Europeans, and these were colonial models: hierarchical models of superiority and subordination (the mandala form) were replaced by ideas of state and nation; royal absolutism began to look anachronistic, but the elite enjoyed success. However, in the 1930s, opposition built as criticisms of absolutist government were made,³¹ and Royal absolutism was rejected in favour of government grounded in constitutional law. Siamese political-cultural identity had been linked to the royal household and religion, but now it was refashioned in favour of the idea of a nation rooted in race, place and language. These ideas were shaped into a political programme by a small group of reformers, including Pridi Banomyong³² and Luang Wichit Wathakan,³³ who formed the People's Party, and their ideas were turned to state-led national development. In June 1932, the army staged a coup, and it quickly gathered widespread support, although there was continuing elite-level opposition; there was also competition amongst the reformers as Pridi and Colonel Phibun manoeuvred for power.

In 1938, Phibun became Prime Minister. In 1939, the country was renamed Thailand. During the late 1930s and 1940s, the government was corporatist and nationalist. The army became key players. Thereafter, as the general crisis of the European system of state-empires gathered strength, events propelled the country into the orbit of Japan. The Thai government embraced a variant of fascism. In 1941, the country declared war on the Western allies and fought a short war against colonial France. But Phibun was removed from power in 1944. At the end of the Pacific War, the country was drawn into the American sphere. A brief interlude ensued with much domestic manoeuvring, until in 1947, Phibun staged a coup. This action inaugurated a long sequence of military-dominated elite governments, but the Americans were content with this and so a significant measure of domestic continuity with pre-war days was established; that is, power reserved to the elite, with the masses disregarded. The post-war period thus developed in terms which granted significant influence to an outside power with its own agendas and which chose to

support one key domestic group: that is, the Thai army. The result was in outline predictable: post-war Thailand became subject to army rule, the royalist faction slowly reasserted itself and governments were changed by military coup.

THAILAND: 1945–2001

After the Pacific War, the state-empires of the Europeans, Japanese and Americans dissolved away. The territories of the former pair attained varieties of independent statehood whilst the USA assumed something of the role of regional hegemon, with its key allies in Northeast Asia and its anti-communist activities spread through the wider region of East Asia. In this context, in particular, in the period of the disintegration of the French position in Indo-China, the USA became the key foreign power in Thailand.

The particular route to the modern world taken by the Thai polity, essentially conservative reform from above, inflected by the 1932 coup, plus the militarized nature of the American's cold war, opened a route for the Thai military, which, along with allies in the senior levels of the bureaucracy, consolidated their domestic political power. And over the following years, commentators have discussed the domestic politics, the demands of the cold war sphere and the role of the military throughout this long post-war period. Three broad lines of enquiry can be sketched³⁴: (1) modernization theory (modelled on the West, such that economic growth plus social change will produce a disposition towards liberal-democratic politics); (2) political economy theory (looking to structural explanations and suggesting that economic growth will be met with difficult domestic politics as the country upgraded links to the wider global economy); and (3) democratic elitist theorists (who unpack the matter of elite disunity and partial democratic development). These debates have run on through the post-war era and into the present day.

1. *Modernization*

The political elite of the USA affirmed the notions of modernization and anti-communism, and one aspect of the scholarly and policy work of this period was an argument to the effect that in poor underdeveloped countries the army could function as a pillar of the state and thus assist the pursuit of modernization, which itself is the best cure for popular dissent in developing countries.³⁵ Modernization theory looked to comprehensive change in economic systems, social relations and cultural ideas and

expectations. The process of modernization would enable poor traditional societies to become rich modern societies.

The project required the state to encourage and facilitate the development of the marketplace, organize social reforms and—in due course—move towards the creation of a democratic polity.

In the case of Thailand, American aid served to reinforce the machinery of the state. The military treated as the key group,³⁶ both for domestic purposes (modernization ideas of the military as the most modern organization and thus key to process of becoming modern) and international purposes, thus Thailand as a base for anti-communist operations. The result was the more or less permanent rule of the military. First, Phibun (1947–1957) embraced American influence and began half-hearted economic reforms. Then Sarit (1957–1963) inaugurates new phase of elite rule, with the move to centrality of monarchy. In all, politics becomes internal to an elite embracing the military, the bureaucracy and a progressively more influential monarchy. A further change of rule takes place as Thanom takes power (1963–1973). The country continues as before. Mainstream foreign analysts offer characterizations of the polity: it is a ‘bureaucratic polity’³⁷ or ‘loosely structured polity’.

2. *Political economic theory*

In contrast, political economists,³⁸ looking to the structural underpinnings of economic activities, social relations and cultural ideas, write of a social world sharply divided into classes—not fixed, but changing—thus, presently, there is a powerful local elite that is linked to the wider global economy, subordinate but not without effective power, along with poor rural farmers, an ineffectual urban bourgeoisie and an impoverished urban poor.

In the post-war period, American anti-communism impacted the local context.³⁹ The USA supplied aid to the Thai government and Thailand was for many years a front-line state during America’s wars in Indo-China; at their maximum, the USA had some 50,000 military based in the country.⁴⁰ Thai military rule was acceptable to the Americans, and popular movements were not welcomed, and local elite-level politics produced a steady stream of military coups. However, in the middle 1970s, there was an interlude with liberal-democratic-style politics, but in the event, this interlude ended with a violent coup.⁴¹

Benedict Anderson⁴² sketches the background to the 1976 coup. *First, American involvement*: after 1945, the USA displaced the Europeans, and was much more actively involved in the life of the country, and relat-

edly the broad American policy stance was centred on anti-communism, and at the time, there was warfare in Indo-China and Thailand becomes a key strategic ally hosting the American military in numerous bases. *Second, economic development and cross-cutting changes in Thai society:* the old bureaucratic-royal-army elite remain in place, Chinese business is not involved and the peasantry remain quiescent. But impact of US war spending changes the economy and thus its constituent social groups, and two new groups take shape: middle-class professionals and lower-middle-class service sector workers. As the government encourages inward investment, it is an economic boom-time and pressures for political reform grow. In time, these feed into the 1973–1976 democracy period. However, the impact of US defeat in Vietnam unsettles the new patterns of social groups and politics in Thailand: the lower middle class are uneasy, the middle class are uneasy and the elite are distinctly unhappy. All this feeds into the 1976 coup, which is an elite attempt to block change in favour of restoring an older-style security. Anderson notes one novelty in the 1976 coup—in the past, politics was reserved for the elite, so violence and killing took place within that group, but now politics is part and parcel of the social life of the country, and violence became public in the guise of the organized violence of street campaigns and killings, with the mobs drawn from those newer social groups unsettled by the withdrawal of USA.

The uneven⁴³ dynamic of economic and social change, which has created new social groups, with novel social aspirations, confronting an established elite determined to protect its position, continues down to the present day; so too the public violence identified by Anderson. In all this, the trio of elite players—bureaucracy, army and palace—claim a particular moral status, superior to the venality of business or politics, and exemplified in the monarchy, an institution protected by lese majesty laws; however, the institution has come under scrutiny, and scholars have asked how it functions within the Thai social world.

Recently, Duncan McCargo has identified the Thai network monarchy, pointing both to the role of the monarchy and the networks of business that flow through and around the institution; so contrary to standard official state ideology, the monarchy is anything but politically neutral. However, the crucial agent in sustaining the system is the army. It has routinely involved itself in politics since the 1930s and it legitimates its own role by professing its loyalty to the monarch, celebrating its moral propriety and declaring an overriding commitment to the country.

3. *Democratic elite theory*

Democratic elite analysis offers a quite different approach to political analysis; derived from inter-war European corporatist theorizing, it points firmly to the role of elite agents. William Case⁴⁴ builds his argument via a debate with available approaches to political analysis—structuralist, looking to macro-forces of class to drive change; modernizationist, looking to the role of the middle classes in building liberal-democratic systems; culturalists (C. Geertz, B. Anderson, J.C. Scott), insisting that all culture is local and in Southeast Asia is concerned with hierarchy, deference and paternalism. Case turns to elite theory. Its origins lie in inter-war Europe with W. Pareto, Mosca and Michels; this trio of theorists insist that in any political system, an elite will form, and the creation of elites is inevitable, and other theoretical aspirations are futile. In the wake of the episode of European fascism, these ideas rather went out of fashion, but they were revived in the form of democratic elite theory by scholars—G. O'Donnel, P. Schmitter, J. Linz—concerned with what were called democratic transitions in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s. The focus is on elite groups, their relationship to ideas of liberal-democracy and hence the overall political nature of the regime.

Cast in these terms, Thai politics assumes an unequivocally elite form; the key elements have been the monarchy, the bureaucracy and the army, and whilst there have been arguments for democratization, and there have been experiments with systems that resemble European or American competitive electoral liberal-democracies, these have been short-lived, as the elite has moved and closed them down. The system is not stable. Case argues that the key to grasping the particular logic of Thai politics is precisely elite disunity—the disunity erodes state capacity; the business community has become powerful as a consequence; business has funded parties to advance their interests, plus civil society has developed and become active. The upshot is a political system that fails to be 'democratic'. Case tags the country 'an unconsolidated democracy'.

4. *The logic of Thai politics*

Thai politics revolves around an elite that comprises the bureaucracy, the army and the palace; its power is buttressed by a particular nationalism, which runs together place, people and King (religion), and it is more directly protected by a lese majesty law which blocks criticism of the system.

From 1945 through to 1976, the country has been dominated by military governments and politics has been a matter for a factionalized elite.

The country has been host to foreign military and its neighbours have been embroiled in vicious civil wars compounded by external proxy competition.⁴⁵ A tentative movement towards democracy 1973–1976 was suppressed by the military in 1976, and Kraivchien takes power, later replaced by Kriangsak and finally succeeded in 1980 by Prem.

List of main post-war coups and elections⁴⁶:

- >1947 Coup installs Phibun Songkhram
- >1957 Coup installs Sarit (dies in 1963)
- >1963 Coup succession installs Thanom Kittikachorn
- >1973 Revolt and King's intervention
- >1975 and 1976 Elections install Seni Pramoj, later Kukrit Pramoj
- >1976 Coup installs Thanin Kraivchien, later Kriangsak Chomanand
- >1980 Coup succession installs Prem Tinsulandonda
- >Failed coup 1981
- >Failed coup 1985
- >1986 Election installs Prem Tinsulandonda
- >1988 Election installs Chatichai Choonhavan
- >1991 Coup and May 1992 Demonstration
- >1992 Election installs Chuan Leekpai
- >1995 Election installs Banharn Silpa-archa
- >1996 Election installs Chavalit Youngchaiyudh, later Chuan Leekpai
- >2001 Election installs Thaksin Shinawatra
- >2005 Election installs Thaksin Shinawatra
- >2006 Coup installs Booniyaratglin, later Surayud
- >2007 Election installs People's Power Party (PPP/TRT)
- >2009 Judiciary installs Democratic Party (DP)
- >2011 Election installs Puea Thai (PT/TRT)
- >2014 Coup installs Prayuth

It was Prem who began a cautious movement towards civilian rule, and this resumed in 1988 when Chatichai became prime minister. Another coup took place in 1991 but was resisted by the population. A confused period follows with a series of elections and short-lived governments until in 2001 when Thaksin's election began a new sequence of political manoeuvring. Once again familiar elite groups—military, bureaucracy and palace—compete for position, but now there is a cross-cutting force, the organized people who join parties and help create a vibrant civil society,

and so the familiar Thai political cycle is made more complex as ordinary people seek to make their mark.⁴⁷

CONTEMPORARY THAILAND: IDENTITY AND STRUCTURE

A national past⁴⁸ provides the polity with a location within the unfolding processes of history, and it records where the polity has come from, and it offers a view of the fundamental nature of the polity and, on that basis, offers the outline of where the polity ought ideally to be going. It is a discourse; that is, ideas are both articulated and embedded in institutional practice. It is always contested, and the ideas affirmed reflect relations of power within the polity. In Thailand, these relations of power are unstable. The polity is dominated by its elite. The elite comprises various fractions, and the balance can change; the masses are available and can be mobilized, and they also assert themselves; and as the balance within the elite shifts and changes, so its interactions with the masses alter and so the national past is adjusted. The ensemble is fluid and debates unfold as to what it is to be Thai and how the nation should be ordered; thus, in recent post-2006 coup era, the role of the monarchy has been stressed.

At the outset of the country's shift to the modern world, there was no Thai nation; there was a king plus key families plus religion plus ordinary people, and over time, as the mandala state was upgraded, a variant bureaucratic rational state and a modern nation were constructed; both were top-down exercises. The upshot was that by the late 1930s Thai identity was taken to revolve around race, place and language.⁴⁹ The king was a key figure; however, the 1932 coup displaces the monarchy, and thereafter, in the years following the Pacific War, the monarchy slowly rebuilds its role. The role of the King becomes more and more important in the polity until by the latter years of the reign, Thai identity involves race, place, language and the central position of the king/religion. An official nationalism is in place. It is marked in routine practice in the form of the proliferation of wayside shrines to the king along the streets in Bangkok; shops and offices display images of the king, and public politics requires deference to the throne; and the ideological circle is kept firmly shut by the routine deployment of draconian lese majesty law.

As the second decade of the twenty-first century approaches, Thai political life is in a disturbed state. A popular bid for reforms following the 1997 financial crisis and involving a new constitution and novel parliament-focused politics from 2001 was undermined over the period

2006–2014 by a series of colour revolution-type street actions, judicial interventions and two military coups. These activities were sponsored by the elite who were anxious to protect their own position, and supported by an urban middle class complaining of business/political corruption. These activities have amounted to an attempt to return to the status quo ante; commentators have suggested that the military/bureaucratic elite seemed likely to construct a constitution and political system redolent of the ‘bureaucratic state’ of earlier years, that is, the 1950s and 1960s.

In comparative terms, recalling the inter-war period in Europe, it seems to be an attempt to construct a politics without politics.⁵⁰ It will fail (necessarily), but the manner of failure will be at issue. How will the polity be reconfigured? Who wins, who loses? Domestic politics are stuck, and the elite will be unable to make their bid for old-style power stick,⁵¹ as recently empowered groups show no sign of abandoning their struggles. Speculating about the future is unhelpful, but one characterization of the situation invokes the long history of the shift to the modern world in Siam/Thailand, positing a repetitive cycle of constitution, election, corruption, coup and then another new constitution. The cycle has continued into the second decade of the twenty-first century as a reactionary elite has asserted itself against new social groups; however, this time around, there are crucial problems: *first*, the king is old and charismatic authority is non-transferable; *second*, there is a deeper issue in respect of the identity of the polity, that is, is there a distinctive and novel form of Thai modernity or should events be discussed in terms of a failed/blocked modernity. If it is the former, then European commentators will have to adjust their expectations (revised ideas of modernity will be needed), and more importantly, many sections of Thai society will have to adjust to what would seem to be a permanent second-class status. If, however, it is the latter, then the issue of the country’s shift to the modern world remains open notwithstanding that progress seems blocked.

CONTEMPORARY THAILAND: FROM THE 2001 ELECTION

The 1997 Asian financial crisis is usually analysed in terms of a domestic crisis cascading through the country and regional contagion spreading around East Asia. In Thailand, the epicentre of the crisis, the domestic impact was severe as the banks, stock market and, finally, the real economy were disrupted with consequent social and political implications. The scale of the damage was great, and all these problems spilled over into the politi-

cal sphere. A new constitution was prepared, the ‘people’s constitution’, and it was seen as the most progressive in the country’s history.⁵² It ushered in a period of new politics: popular, democratic and development oriented.

In the new political environment, with its parliament, parties and an energetic public sphere (media), the key player to emerge was Thaksin Shinawatra, leader of the new Thai Rak Thai party (TRT). The party was built by an alliance surrounding a business tycoon whose base lay in provincial Chiang Mai and the party’s stance was pro-development, which implied drawing in the usually neglected rural farming communities. The party won the first post-crisis election held in 2001. The new prime minister styled himself on Lee Kuan Yew and Mahathir Mohamad, and the goal was the construction of a Thai variant of the now familiar regional pattern of a developmental state oriented towards national development. At the outset, the policies adopted proved both successful and popular as the country recovered from the financial crisis, debts to the IMF were dealt with ahead of schedule and rural development initiatives were begun with social welfare addressed in the area of health care. But there were also problems: in particular, in the South, there was violent disorder, and in Bangkok, a harsh violent campaign against recreational drug-users. Critics of the government were not slow to call attention to these problems, but notwithstanding the problems and criticisms, the TRT government was re-elected in the scheduled 2005 election.

The success of the TRT proved to be highly unpalatable to the traditional elite. It is not clear just what triggered their active hostility. One *Financial Times* commentator listed business disagreements, trespass on palace disputes and accusations of corruption. The upshot was shortly after the TRT was re-elected to office, in itself a first in Thai politics, and a long campaign began to extirpate the TRT grouping in order to return to the political status quo ante, that is, political life revolving around the Bangkok elite. There have been a number of phases in the struggle: (1) TRT, 2001–2006; (2) a military coup and rule, 2006–2007; (3) a PPP/TRT⁵³ government, 2007–2008; (4) a constitutional coup and DP government, 2009–2011; (5) a PT/TRT government, 2011–2014. In 2014, a coup removed the government, the army returned to power and the status quo ante was on the face of it re-established.

The overall sequence had—as noted—a number of stages.

1. TRT 2001–2006: *new politics*

The 1997 financial crisis caused considerable economic and social damage in Thailand. It also provoked popular political debate that led to the preparation of a new constitution. In the context of the new system, the

TRT was established by a rich businessman from the Northeast, Thaksin Shinawatra. The party was well funded and ran a Western-style campaign in which hitherto neglected groups were targeted, in particular people living in the Northeast of the country. These people had long regarded by the Bangkok elite as backward farmers, but they were in fact politically astute enough to rally to TRT side in order to advance their particular agenda. The TRT won the 2001 elections: it gained overwhelming support and it commanded the parliament.

The TRT won support from non-elite groups, many from the Northeast, but many poorer Bangkok city residents also supported the TRT. In power, the government modelled itself on other top-down developmental states, in particular Singapore and Malaysia, neighbours in ASEAN. In its early years, it successfully pursued a national development strategy, and the country recovered from 1997 debacle: debts to the IMF were paid off ahead of schedule, reforms to agricultural development funding were made, likewise reforms to health care. Nonetheless, there were problems: the 2003 drug crackdown and the 2004 trouble in South; however, notwithstanding these doubts, the TRT was re-elected in 2005.

But there was now increasing opposition from both the traditional Bangkok elite and the Bangkok middle classes, and public criticisms were made as Thaksin's business dealings were scrutinized. The TRT called 2006 snap election, and the elite linked somewhat misnamed DP ran a boycott and the courts declared the election void. New election dates were scheduled and media commentators anticipated a TRT win.

2. Military coup and rule 2006–2007

Opposition towards TRT and its new politics hardened into the outright enmity of the traditional elite comprising the palace, the bureaucracy, the military plus the economic elite of Bangkok. In September 2006, elite organized what the *Economist* newspaper⁵⁴ dubbed the Royal Coup.⁵⁵ In May 2007, TRT was dissolved by the courts.

Following the coup, a period of military rule followed. Commentators excoriated the military, characterizing them as mistaken in their actions and incompetent in their stewardship of the economy⁵⁶; a new constitution was presented by the military and gained public support in an August 2007 referendum.

3. PPP 2007–2008

In December 2007, a new election was held and the successor party to the dissolved TRT, called the PPP, won the election. Samak Sundaravej

became Prime Minister. However, this does not settle matters, and the traditional elite continued their hostility towards the new politics, and here, as an overt role for the military is unavailable (given the foreign reception and their own recent incompetence in office), two new strategies came into focus: a struggle via the courts to undermine and expel from office the government, along with a parallel struggle in the streets involving a local variant of the tactics of colour revolutions. Here the 'Yellow Shirts' made their appearance. So, after the PPP election victory, the Yellow Shirts began street protests. In August, the courts convicted Thaksin of financial crimes, and he fled to London. In September, the courts removed the Prime Minister (as his appearance in a television cooking programme was deemed an illegal income), and Somchai Wongsawat was made Prime Minister. In October 2008, Thaksin was convicted in absentia, and Yellow Shirts occupied the international airport in the city. In December 2008, Somchai resigned after courts ruled that PPP had acted illegally, and the party was dissolved.

4. *Judicial coup*⁵⁷ and DP rule 2009–2011

A new government took power; the elite allied with DP, and they managed to assemble a coalition in the parliament. The ousted supporters of the now dissolved PPP then proceeded to organize street demonstrations. The demonstrators were tagged the Red Shirts, and these protests ran on until a series of demonstrations around an ASEAN summit in April 2009. These demonstrations provoked public criticism and produced an uneasy calm,⁵⁸ but later further street demonstrations took place. In March 2010, the Red Shirt demonstrators occupied central Bangkok, and they built a number of ramshackle camps. In May 2010, the army violently dispersed the protesters amidst serious rioting, and around 100-plus people were killed, and downtown Bangkok suffered significant damage as a result of fires being set during the rioting.

5. *PT 2011–2013*

In July 2011, a further election was held and the latest successor party to the TRT, now the PT, won. Yingluck Shinawatra became Prime Minister. The government faced problems: some beyond its control (floods); some of its own making (rice pledging scheme, attempt to amend constitution and attempt to pass amnesty/reconciliation law); but many of its problems were of its opponents making (Yellow Shirt street protests, DP manoeuvring and judicial involvement on the part of the elite).

Confronted by mounting problems, the PT held a snap election in early 2014, which they won. The DP opposition boycotted and the Yellow

Shirt street politics continued, and they blocked voting in a number of constituencies. The court ruled election void because not all Thais could vote on the same day, and in early 2014, optimistic anti-government commentators were expecting a second Judicial Coup and newspapers laid out schedules for such a move,⁵⁹ whilst pessimistic pro-government supporters said that the coup had already begun; thus, this time around, a slow-motion Judicial Coup.

6. *May 2014: second judicial coup*

The PT government ran on in face of muted criticism until the government proposed in the autumn of 2013 an amnesty bill that would have reset the political system in pre-coup form, that is, amnesty for those caught up in legal tangles related to political manoeuvring. The PT government's attempt in November 2013 to introduce an amnesty bill, an attempt to recover from years of political tension, provided the elite with a pretext for action designed to undermine the government (i.e., remove it from power by non-constitutional means).

The action had two strands: street level and judicial.

The first area of action revolved around street protests, the colour revolution-style mobilization of masses. Such protests are carefully organized and expensive to run and have been organized and bankrolled by wealthy elite families.⁶⁰ The mass demonstrations continued through the following months; they ran for around six months. And by early 2014, the PT government faced a rapidly deteriorating political situation—continued mass regime change-oriented colour revolution actions on the streets of downtown Bangkok were beginning to impact the tourist economy, and their strategy of occupying or blockading government offices along with seeking supporters in the bureaucracy and army and middle classes along with launching or encouraging legal and administrative challenges slowly rendered the government impotent.

The second area of action was political and administrative-judicial. Here the actions of the government were blocked by the opposition DP or voided by judicial or constitutional oversight bodies; thus the main conservative political party, the DP,⁶¹ the parliamentary wing of the elite, boycotted February 2014 snap elections. The Constitutional Court decided that as the elections had not all been held on the same day—as a direct result of the boycott and blockade—the election was void. At which point, in early 2014, commentators looking to the likely unfolding of the crisis offered several speculations: (1) PT legal problems would fade along with anti-government demonstrations and there would be new elections with

DP participation but a PT win and the cycle will begin again after a short period; (2) Constitutional Court engineers a constitutional coup and PT banned, then an appointed prime minister acceptable to traditional elite would be installed, and thereafter issue is reaction of PT supporters, and here speculations ranged from acquiescence through to violence; or (3) there will be a military coup cast in standard clichéd terms of morally upright soldiers rescuing the country from venal incompetent politicians and their ranks of deluded supporters, bought by a few expensive and untenable populist policies.

This double-track process culminated in May 2014 with the court's dismissal of the Prime Minister (whose earlier transfer of a senior civil servant linked to the opposition was declared lawful but done so quickly as to be lacking in 'morality'). The dismissal of the Prime Minister was welcomed by the street demonstrators who redoubled their efforts with demonstrations aimed at removing the PT government in favour of a nominally non-party government to be appointed by a vaguely specified group of elder statesmen who would be asked to undertake equally vaguely specified reforms; in effect, the resumption of power of the old elite; thus the end-point of the long programme of street/political-judicial action, the judicial coup.

*7. May 2014: military coup*⁶²

On 20 May, the army announced that it was imposing martial law, and it put troops onto the streets in Bangkok. It did not discuss this with the government ahead of the action, and it was at pains to stress that it was not staging a coup. Early actions included banning large demonstrations (both Yellow and Red Shirts) and taking propaganda television stations off the air. Early non-actions notably involved announcing that the government continued in office.⁶³ The immediate schedule of questions revolved around the intentions of the army. Taken at face value, the army had moved to quell rising tensions, but more sceptically, the army had moved to pre-empt popular demonstrations ahead of further moves in the slow-moving judicial coup: the dismissal of the PT government and installation of a replacement. On 21 May, the army leadership brought figures from the contending political factions together ostensibly to find a solution to the impasse (provoked by elite refusal to acquiesce in rule of elected government), but the talks lasted only a short while.

On 22 May, the army leadership announced it was taking power. The army leadership justified its actions in the usual way, laying claim to a particular moral status that obliged them to act on behalf of king, coun-

try and people. Commentators suggest that this self-understanding is sincerely held. The three-day coup was completed, street demonstration sites were cleared, press and TV restricted and around 150 key players were seized by the army; reports⁶⁴ stated that most were from government side. The constitution was suspended with only the Senate and Constitutional Court left in place. The army leadership announced a projected rapid return to democracy contingent upon unspecified reforms. Commentators noted tensions amongst factions in royal household and likely differences amongst the 250,000 strong army plus the well-advertised differences between political groups. General Prayuth thus became the latest military dictator to run the country. Commentators were gloomy about the immediate future. They pointed to deep structural changes in Thai society, in particular, economic change had turned poor peasants into less poor potential citizens, and Thaksin had spotted these structural changes and responded to them; former peasants, now citizens, were enfranchised both *de jure* and *de facto*. The situation was made more awkward for the recalcitrant elite by the age and infirmity and great wealth of the king, and so the issue of royal succession compounded the elite's problems.⁶⁵

The coup leaders announced a road map; they announced a model for an interim parliament.⁶⁶ Commentators began wondering if the promised re-establishment of democracy would mean an authoritarian-managed democracy, a system with the established elite left safely in power with the wider country enjoying a narrowly restricted role; in all, a system oriented towards the ideal of a politics without politics. But after a few months as the military announced plans, quiet criticism began in the now cautious mass media.⁶⁷ Politics began again, and personnel in the new assembly were discussed, the role of prime minister considered, along with the failings of early plans for shape of new constitution—and so on. The coup leader, General Prayuth Chan-o-cha, repeatedly postponed the promulgation of a new constitution and promised elections.⁶⁸

8. *Going forward*

It is unclear how the unrest will subside. The political struggle has taken on aspects of elite-level vendetta. The street-level politics of competing organized gangs seems tribal in style. The hostility of the traditional elite to the new politics introduced in 2001 by TRT remains fixed; indeed, its expression seems sharper. Palace, civil service, local elite and local media are all quite direct about their opposition to TRT and its successor parties/personnel. At the same time, the supporters of the TRT and its successors remain in place, notwithstanding what is now nearing a decade

of sustained elite hostility. And in all this, there is one imponderable: the officially charismatic king is the figurehead of the elite, and he is now very old, and the attitudes of the population towards the crown prince are unclear. More broadly, the status of the monarchy is in question amongst some of the population.⁶⁹ In respect of the membership of the elite, it is clear that a process of regime transition is underway. Thus far it has been handled catastrophically badly and the death of the King will further unsettle domestic politics. On a broader perspective, one knowledgeable commentator⁷⁰ remarked that the conflict 'is pitting an entrenched elite that is destined to lose power against new political forces whose rise seems inexorable', which may be true, but established elites are not noted for leaving the historical stage quietly; they resist.⁷¹ The Thai elite's decade-long struggle continues.

THAILAND: THE ROUTE TO THE MODERN WORLD OR THE MANNER OF FAILURE

Cast in terms of the historical dynamic of structures, agents and their projects, the traditional Thai political system is both distinctive. First, *the structure of the polity is distinctive*—it is radically divided (class and ethnicity), and the elite deploy ideas/rituals to legitimate and secure their position (ideology); there is an elite that is quite separate from the majority of the population; the elite comprises the monarchy,⁷² the army, the higher ranks of the civil service and the higher ranks of the Buddhist church. *Second, the elite constitutes a highly active agent*—that is, it both affirms a distinctive ideology and seeks to keep the population safely within the frame of that ideology by making criticism of its core elements illegal via a draconian lese majesty law. As Alasdair MacIntyre remarked about Stalinism, it all makes sense from within the system.⁷³ And *third, the elite political-cultural project is pragmatic*. It is conservative; thus the status of the monarchy is stressed, and great play has been made down the years to the King's concern for 'sufficiency economics', which, viewed charitably, is a variant of the familiar idea of sustainable development or, viewed more sceptically, a Thai elite version of British Victorian ideas of 'everyone in their place'.⁷⁴ The project is also commercially minded; thus the elite are not poor, but they are typically very much richer than the average ordinary member of Thai society,⁷⁵ and whilst this is not unusual in East Asia, it is unusual to have any criticism of the system declared illegal (and the lese majesty law

is invoked). Most of the population are structurally situated below this elite. The urban middle classes, the urban lower middle classes, the urban poor, the rural masses, the rural poor and so on have all been effectively excluded from politics in the past; traditionally, the business of politics was a matter for the elite.

This traditional pattern has slowly lost plausibility. As economic growth has spread throughout the country, the hitherto poor are no longer marginalized: they have access to the modern economy, modern consumer goods and modern means of communication. The economic and social structural underpinnings of the elite/mass political system have shifted. The balance was fatally disturbed in 2001 when the post-financial crisis constitution ushered in a novel popular competitive electoral democratic system, and new elites gained access to the political system along with new groups of ordinary people, those recruited to support the newly organized political parties. An era of popular liberal-democratic-style politics began. It has been met by relentless elite-level hostility.

Contemporary Thai politics therefore involves the old elites—monarchy, army, bureaucracy and church—with their old legitimating ideology of King, nation and country and their established Bangkok-based corporate partners, along with new groups including provincial business groups and ordinary people drawn from the poorer sections of society, both in Bangkok and in more rural areas. The traditional elite-centred system has been disturbed, but there has been no transition to a liberal-democratic-style democracy, nor is there a stable alternative institutional structure in sight; rather, the elite, seemingly appalled at what has been unleashed post-financial crisis, are seeking to block further change and are indeed to find a route back to the status quo ante.

NOTES

1. A.D. King 1990 *Urbanism, Colonialism and the World Economy*, London, Routledge.
2. See Amitav Acharya 2000 *The Quest for Identity: International Relations of Southeast Asia*, Oxford University Press.
3. On this, see Kullada Kesboonchoo Mead 2004 *The Rise and Decline of Thai Absolutism*, London, Routledge Curzon—the author argues that the Thai state was created in the context of the pressures of an expansionist nineteenth-century capitalism and a local elite concerned to adapt and survive—the adaptation was

only partial as reformers and conservatives both inhabited the realm of the elite—in 1932, the absolutist state was removed or recast by reformers looking to advance beyond the absolutist state system.

4. After Alasdair MacIntyre 1971 *Against the Self Images of the Age*, London, Duckworth.
5. Symbolic—also significant material players—see Duncan McCargo on the ‘network monarchy’.
6. For scholarly purposes—getting the story straight—others offer characterizations with other concerns in mind—city risk analysis, money—foreign policy analysts, state interests.
7. For example, in the case of the UK, from historians—records of the debates and manoeuvring attending slow democratization (Sidney Pollard 1971 *The Idea of Progress*, Harmondsworth, Penguin)—and from political theorists—various models of democracy—affirmed at one point or other in the debate and associated with one or other politician or thinker (David Held 1987 *Models of Democracy*, Cambridge, Polity).
8. For present purposes—this is not a fixed model (Held offers a survey, not a history or report on practice—thus there are no given definitive models); rather it is an unfolding project—so the idea of democracy can be unpacked as idea, institution and historical achievement—produces scope for a rich set of variously democratic polities.
9. This section is derived from P.W. Preston 2010 *National Pasts in Europe and East Asia*, London, Routledge.
10. The Portuguese established a base on the east coast at Goa in 1510, an inevitably small-scale trading base, essentially pre-modern.
11. Philip Lawson 1993 *The East India Company: A History*, London, Longman.
12. A list of these numerous wars is available at <http://www.zum.de/whkmla/military/india/milxbrindia.html>—accessed 11 July 2009.
13. A.D. King 1990 *Urbanism, Colonialism and the World Economy*, London, Routledge.
14. On the opium trade and its importance to the British state-empire, see Brian Inglis 1976 *The Opium War*, London, Coronet; Carl Trocki 1999 *Opium, Empire and the Global Political Economy: A*

Study of the Asian Opium Trade 1750–1950, London, Routledge;
 Julia Lovell 2011 *The Opium War: Drugs, Dreams and the Making
 of China*, London, Picador.

15. In the case of the British, Labuan, Weiheiwei and Bencoolen were not successful and company officials had doubts about the viability of Singapore and reacted negatively to the establishment of Hong Kong; in brief, success was never guaranteed, nor was the type of success attained.
16. P.W. Preston 2007 *Singapore in the Global System: Relationship, Structure and Change*, London, Routledge.
17. S. Tsang 2004 *A Modern History of Hong Kong*, Hong Kong University Press.
18. Bruce A. Elleman 2001 *Modern Chinese Warfare, 1795–1989*, London, Routledge; see chapter seven.
19. On Shanghai: L. Cook Johnson 1995 *Shanghai: From Market Town to Treaty Port 1074–1858*, Stanford University Press; E. Dennison and Guang Yu Ren 2006 *Building Shanghai: The Story of China's Gateway*, London, Wiley.
20. C. Baker and P. Phongpaichit 2005 *A History of Thailand*, Cambridge University Press, p. 89.
21. Baker and Phongpaichit 2005.
22. Acharya 2000.
23. Acharya 2000 pp. 18–29.
24. M. Askew 2002 *Bangkok: Place, Practice and Representation*, London, Routledge, pp. 2329.
25. It was the successor city to Ayutthaya, destroyed by the Burmese in 1776—see C. Baker and P. Phongpaichit 2005 *A History of Thailand*, Cambridge University Press.
26. Baker and Phongpaichit 2005 p. 12.
27. Baker and Phongpaichit 2005 p. 61.
28. Baker and Phongpaichit 2005 have a series of maps showing the changing borders.
29. Baker and Phongpaichit 2005.
30. Series of influential kings: Mongkut r1851–1868, a reformer; Chulalongkorn r1868–1910, a reformer, creates elite bureaucracy and pursues modernization from above; Vajiravudh r1910–1925, creates official nationalism; Prajadhipok r1925–1933, removed; Mahidol r1933–1946, period of regional conflict; and Bhumibol r1946–, reformer.

31. Baker and Phongpaichit 2015 pp. 109–112.
32. Thai politician, reformer and participant in the 1932 coup.
33. S. Barme 1993 *Luang Wichit Wathakan and the Creation of Thai Identity*, Singapore, ISEAS, argues that Wichit was a political activist (and artist and administrator) who knew the reform leaders and helped create Thai nationalism—Barme states that it was a top-down construction (cf Benedict Anderson); it was not a popular grass-roots idea.
34. For an example of locating analysis, see K. Hewison 1985 ‘The State and Capitalist Development’ in R. Higgot and R. Robison eds 1985 *Southeast Asia: Essays in the Political Economy of Structural Change*, London, Routledge.
35. Hence W.W. Rostow 1960 *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*, Cambridge University Press.
36. See K. J. Hewison 1985 ‘The State and Capitalist Development in Thailand’ in R. Higgot and R. Robison eds. 1985 *Southeast Asia: Essays in the Political Economy of Structural Change*, London, Routledge; Baker and Phongpaichit 2005, chapter 6, point to American money producing a bloated and corrupt Thai military.
37. See Fred Riggs or J.L.S. Girling 1981 *The Bureaucratic Polity in Modernizing Societies*, Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
38. See, for example, Hewison 1985.
39. Hewison 1985 p. 269, 273; see also N. Hamilton-Hart 2012 *Hard Interests, Soft Illusions*, Cornell University Press, who argues that local elites accommodated themselves to US power as it suited their interests, and claims about democracy and so on were useful illusions in which interests could be wrapped.
40. Benedict Anderson 1998 *The Spectre of Comparisons*, London, Verso, p. 146.
41. Events tracked by Kevin Hewison 1993 ‘Of regimes, state and pluralities: Thai Politics enters the 1990s’ in K. Hewison, R. Robison and G. Rodan eds. 1993 *Southeast Asia in the 1990s: Authoritarianism, Democracy and Capitalism*, St Leonards, Allen and Unwin.
42. Anderson 1998 pp. 139–73.
43. Thus, there were economic policy issues in the 1980s—K. Hewison 1987 ‘National Interests and Economic Downturn: Thailand’ in R. Robison, K. Hewison and R. Higgot eds. 1987 *Southeast Asia*

in the 1980s: The Politics of Economic Crisis, Sydney, Allen and Unwin; and later, Thailand was the local epicentre of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis; on this, see Pasuk Phongpaichit and C. Baker 2000 *Thailand's Crisis*, Singapore, ISEAS.

44. W. Case 2002 *Politics in Southeast Asia*, London, Curzon.
45. A macro-scale overview of American activity is provided by Michael Yahuda 2011 3rd ed. *The International Politics of the Asia-Pacific*, London, Routledge.
46. Information is culled from Benedict Anderson, William Case and Kevin Hewison, plus *Wikipedia* summaries—the list mentions main figures—detail is labyrinthine and is not pursued here.
47. Hewison make the point that the space for public politics ebbs and flows—there is no linear progression and nor is there a definitive exercise in demobilization; rather, the space for public politics is contested—see K. Hewison 1996 ‘Political Opposition and Regime Change in Thailand’ in G. Rodan ed 1996 *Political Opposition in Industrializing Asia*, London, Routledge; K. Hewison 1996 ‘Emerging Social Forces in Thailand’ in R. Robison and S.G. Goodman eds. 1996 *The New Rich in Asia*, London, Routledge.
48. On this—see Patrick Wright 1985 *On Living in an Old Country*, London, Verso—he takes the idea from Agnes Heller, the humanist Marxist scholar.
49. Baker and Phongpaichit 2005.
50. See Richardson on EU, see Ben Rosamund.
51. Duncan McCargo ‘The elite cannot turn back the tide of Thai politics’ in *Financial Times* 8 May 2014.
52. The constitution was prepared by a popular drafting committee—it was approved in a referendum—it was overturned by the military coup of 2006.
53. The elite used the courts to disqualify TRT staff and the party itself—it reinvented itself first as PPP and after that incarnation was dissolved as the PT, this last led successfully by Yingluck Shinawatra until the latest coup.
54. At this time, the newspaper, whose articles are not signed, clearly had a very knowledgeable commentator.
55. *The Economist* ‘A Right Royal Mess’ 4 December 2008.
56. Interestingly, the London-based newspaper, the *Economist*, excoriated the coup leaders as an error and thereafter incompetent.

57. *The Economist* 'Desperate Days' 27 November 2008; Gwynne Dyer 'Final Nail in Thailand's Democracy Coffin' in *South China Morning Post* 16 December 2008.
58. *The Economist* 'Dousing the Flames' 18 April 2009.
59. *Nation* and *Bangkok Post*—March 2014.
60. *Financial Times* 7 May 2014 'Thailand's rising political risk'.
61. For an excoriating critique of the shameful behaviour of the Democratic Party and its leaders, see R. Lloyd Parry 2014 'The Story of Thaksin Shinawatra' in *London Review of Books* 36.12 19 June 2014, in particular the last paragraph—later reports in *Economist* and *Financial Times* noted that elements of the Bangkok elite were advocating boycotting European luxury goods as a protest against hurtful criticism.
62. *Financial Times* 7 May—'Thailand's rising political risk'—this was one of many pieces in the *Financial Times*—similar pieces were printed in the *Economist*.
63. The military staged coup—the second aimed at the new politics—was staged without violence—the notion of a coup is available in Thai political culture (recall Peter Winch)—there is an available understanding within the public sphere of the nature and logic of military coups—they are intelligible—the players have a script—political life went quiet for a whilst—the coup leaders announced plans for reform and a return to democracy.
64. See *Daily Telegraph* of that date.
65. See May 2014 editions of the *Economist* and the *Financial Times*, see also *RSIS Commentary* 096/2014, see also Andrew MacGregor-Marshall blog at *zenjournalist*—see book of same to be published in autumn 2014 by Zed Press.
66. *Bangkok Post* July 2014.
67. Bangkok in late July and early August—see cautious commentaries in *The Nation* and *The Bangkok Post*.
68. At the time of writing (March 2016), elections have been re-promised for 2017.
69. See 'A Right Royal Mess' in *The Economist* 4 December 2008; more recently, see 'Treason in Cyberspace: Thailand's lese majesty law' in *The Economist* 4 July 2009.
70. Duncan McCargo writing in the *Financial Times* 8 May 2014.
71. In respect of Europe and the post-1945 establishment of liberal-democracy—late—see Arno Mayer 1981 *The Persistence of the Old*

Regime, New York, Croom Helm; see also T. Nairn 1988 *The Enchanted Glass: Britain and Its Monarchy*, London, Hutchinson Radius.

72. See Duncan McCargo 2005 'Network monarchy and legitimacy crises in Thailand' in *The Pacific Review* 2005 18.4.
73. MacIntyre 1971.
74. Hence the hymn 'All things bright and beautiful'.
75. For a development approach, see J. Rigg 1997 *Southeast Asia: The Human Landscape of Modernization and Development*, London, Routledge.