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DEVELOPING DEMOCRACY UNDER A NEW CONSTITUTION IN THAILAND

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FEW EMERGING DEMOCRACIES OFFER a better laboratory for exploring democratic consolidation than Thailand. The evolution of Thailand's political system was so dramatic that even one of the most severe critics of Thai democracy acknowledged, "Thailand has been shifting incrementally away from semidemocracy toward democracy" (Samudavanija 1995:340). However, the establishment of truly democratic institutions and practices has been a relatively recent phenomenon. There remains, therefore, much room for a discussion of the extent of Thai democracy's degree of consolidation (Linz and Stepan 2001; O'Donnell 2001).

Thailand's history of parliamentarism dates back to the fall of the absolute monarchy in 1932. But in the period up to 1985, only about six of those years can be characterized as truly democratic. Regardless of the actual form of government, however, a commitment to democracy—even an ideology of democracy—maintained itself through periods of one-party rule, personalistic autocracy, and military despotism. The transition to genuine democracy, beginning in the mid-1980s, built upon this latent democratic commitment in the mass public, and established itself in the events of "Bloody May" in 1992, when mass demonstrations forced a military junta to relinquish its power, permit new elections, and institute a transition to-

ward democracy that was interrupted by a military coup in 2006. This study examines mass attitudes toward democracy in 2001, five years after a new constitution introduced significant structural revisions to the political system. Data for the chapter come from one of the first probability sample surveys of political attitudes in Thailand. A total of 1,546 valid responses were gathered from a nationwide sample of eligible voters.

The 2001 survey caught the Thai public in an optimistic and supportive frame of mind. Yet signs of trouble could be discerned as well. A key issue was the split between Bangkok and the rural hinterland. With each voter in the rural areas counting as much as each voter in Bangkok, it was only a matter of time before political power would shift to the politics and priorities of rural Thailand, resulting in policies and practices Bangkok elites viewed as corrupt. Corruption indeed was the chief reason given by the military leaders who ousted the Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in a bloodless coup on September 19, 2006.

The lesson to be learned from our data and the ensuing events is that even high levels of support for democracy among mass publics do not guarantee democratic persistence when faced with a determined, antidemocratic elite that controls instruments of power such as the military. While the leaders of the 2006 coup promised a rapid return to democracy, as long as such coups are possible, democracy cannot be considered consolidated no matter how supportive mass publics may be.

1. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN THAILAND

A palace coup at dawn on June 24, 1932, brought the Thai absolute monarchy to an end. When he finally abdicated in 1935, King Prajadhipok (Rama VII) specifically criticized the regime that had replaced him and, in a brief public message, transferred sovereignty to the people of Thailand. In his message of abdication, the king emphasized that he was turning power over to the people, rather than to the incumbent government. He stated, "I am willing to surrender the powers I formerly exercised to the people as a whole, but I am not willing to turn them over to any individual or any group to use in an autocratic manner without heeding the voice of the people" (Wyatt 1982:249).

Although the abdication marked the final dissolution of royal powers, it is also clear that what followed was not a genuine participatory democracy.

Political power was monopolized by an exclusive elite in a one-party state (the People's Party), which promised full electoral democracy only when at least half the population had completed primary education or ten years had passed, whichever came first.

Thailand held its first direct elections in November 1937, when 26% of the electorate chose half of the National Assembly. Another round of elections was held in November 1938, but the National Assembly remained half-appointed. Because of World War II no new elections were held until 1946. Prime Minister Phibun Songkram took advantage of his extended tenure to undertake a program of economic and social nation-building, which was carried out in a highly authoritarian manner.

During the postwar period, prospects for democracy brightened temporarily with the creation of four political parties (at least in name) and a new constitution providing for a fully elected House of Representatives and a Senate chosen by the House. In November 1947, however, the military seized the government, supporting a series of authoritarian governments for the next twenty-six years. Throughout the postwar era, however, the ideology of democracy persisted, reinforced in part by a growing consciousness, especially among the rural population, of oppression by the military, the police, and the bureaucracy. This disaffection from authoritarianism served to bolster an equally antiauthoritarian sentiment among the educated middle classes. By 1973, a coalition of workers, farmers, students, and members of the middle classes began to mobilize for democracy and repeatedly clashed with the police in street demonstrations. In order to prevent mass bloodshed, the king intervened to end the authoritarian regime.

The ensuing period was one of political and economic instability. Although leftist parties had benefited from the revolution initially, they lost power in the 1976 parliamentary elections, ushering in a period of organized atrocities by right-wing vigilantes against figures advocating radical democracy. The bloodshed culminated in an infamous massacre at Thammasat University, where protesting students were shot, lynched, burned alive, or imprisoned. Not long after, the military reasserted itself with the support of the ruling establishment, including much of the middle class, bringing this experiment in democracy to an end.

By 1978, disaffection with the excesses of the authoritarian right had again revived the demand for democracy among the Thai public. There followed a period of political stability and, arguably, steady progression toward democratic governance under the leadership of General Prem Tinsulanonda. Modern Thai democracy can be dated to the parliamentary elec-

tions of 1983, which provided the mandate for the consolidation of Prem's leadership. In 1986, when economic conditions created social unrest, Prem rebuffed demands from the military for another seizure of power, choosing instead to step aside and hold new elections. In 1988, fully democratic elections were finally held and a full-fledged coalition government assumed office under Chatichai Choonhaven.

By the 1990s, support for democracy was robust and growing. Although perceived corruption of the Chatichai cabinet led to another coup in 1991, popular pressure forced the junta to promise new elections within a year and appoint a highly regarded bureaucrat, Anand Panyarachun, as prime minister. When the leader of the junta reneged on a promise not to seek the premiership following the 1992 elections, mass demonstrations again resulted in the monarch's intervention, who tilted the balance in favor of restoring democracy. In the opinions of many analysts, this episode represented an affirmation of democratic politics rather than a failure of democratic persistence, for it made clear that continuation of authoritarian rule, even if benign in nature, was no longer compatible with public sentiment.

The 1997 Constitution radically revised the electoral system and created new institutions of governance that parallel elections as major instruments of democratic politics. Three institutions were of special relevance for understanding how Thailand's political system worked after 1997. The first was the Constitutional Court, a body of fifteen judges appointed by the king on the advice of the Senate, which in turn worked from a list submitted by a committee composed primarily of academics in law and political science. The court was composed of five members from the Supreme Court of Justice, two members of the Supreme Administrative Court, five qualified lawyers, and three political scientists. These persons were supposed to be removed from any association with politics or government and were charged with interpretation of the Constitution as issues arose.

The second new institution was the Election Commission. The process of selection for this body was similar to that for the Constitutional Court, and members of the commission were banned from holding political office or joining political parties. The commission had the power to invalidate elections, disqualify candidates, and call new elections when balloting was suspect. The exercise of this power led to microscopic examinations of the integrity of election processes, leading to the most open, corruption-free elections in Thai history.[1]

The third important new institution was the National Anti-Corruption Commission, composed of nine members chosen in a manner similar to

the Constitutional Court and the Election Commission. This body had sweeping constitutional authority to investigate officials' assets and determine whether corruption had occurred. Anyone with a petition endorsed by fifty thousand citizens could bring any government official before the commission, which could impose a five-year ban from political office or initiate criminal proceedings. It remains to be seen how these instruments designed to control the government will be carried over in future constitutional constructions.

The 1997 Constitution, however, never solved the problem of how these bodies were to be constituted. The solution was to have members of these agencies appointed by a theoretically nonpartisan Senate. Because these bodies often ruled in favor of the government, criticism of the Thaksin administration, which took power in 2001, began to spill over onto these independent bodies.

As in 1991, a military coup in September 2006 overturned a democratically elected government on the pretext of corruption. Whether corruption truly existed at the highest levels has yet to be proven, but what is clear is that Thai elites were still willing to sacrifice democracy when they found control of government slipping from their grasp. For many Thai traditional elites who rationalized the coup, there appeared to be a sentiment that "we had to destroy democracy in order to save it."

Clearly, Thailand failed a major test of democratic government—that winners of authoritative elections exercise a monopoly over legitimate force (Linz and Stepan 1996a:93). Even among supporters of the coup, however, the ideology of democracy continued, and polls taken only weeks prior to the coup showed overwhelming support for democracy. Both supporters and opponents of the Thaksin regime claimed to view democratic procedures and institutions as most appropriate for governing collective life. The strong support for democracy, even in the midst of deep political cleavages over the Thaksin government, made Thailand an "attitudinally" consolidated democracy (Linz and Stepan 1996a:94).

2. CONCEPTIONS OF DEMOCRACY

Since 1932, the ideology of democracy has been so often invoked by democratic, authoritarian, and even despotic regimes that popular conceptions of this form of government are highly ambiguous. Wyatt (1984) suggests that during the early days of constitutional governance, enthusiasm for "consti-

tution" and "democracy" was not dampened by the fact that people had no clear idea of either of the terms' meanings.[2]

Some interpreters argue that democracy is understood differently in Thailand than in Europe and North America, because of cultural traditions (e.g., the so-called Asian values) that place a greater emphasis on communal rather than individualistic values. According to this view, Thai respondents should express values markedly different from those of Europeans and Americans, if not for the fixed choices offered in survey instruments.

Our survey addressed these issues by posting the following open-ended question: "What does democracy mean to you?" Respondents were encouraged to supply up to three answers. The responses are displayed in chapter 1, table 1.3. Only about 80% of respondents could formulate a clear interpretation of democracy, and those who offered a second or a third response amounted to only 25% and 7% respectively. However, among those who responded, their understandings of democracy do not appear to differ substantially from those of European and American respondents. Over one-third (35%) of Thai respondents understood democracy in terms of freedom and liberties, such as the freedoms of speech, press, and expression. Another 27% understood democracy in terms of political rights and democratic procedures. Yet another 26% offered interpretations in general positive terms.

Most surprising was the infrequent mention of traditional Asian values, e.g., good governance, social equality, or duties to society. Fewer than 11% of respondents mentioned social equality and justice. Only one person mentioned "openness or government transparency," and no one mentioned job creation or welfare provisions. Nor did anyone mention fighting corruption. Equally noteworthy is the fact that few respondents mentioned the development of institutions traditionally associated with democratic governance. There were no mentions of political parties or even the parliament as a component of democracy. In fact, as we will see in section 4, for many Thais, political parties and the parliament seem to be part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

These findings do not necessarily conform to elite views of what less-educated individuals believe about democracy. The data show that the Thai public was equipped with clear interpretations of democracy even by the standards of the mature democracies, and suggest that Thai views of democracy do not differ substantially from the general meanings of liberal democracy in international discourse. Furthermore, these views appear consistent

throughout the country and are not restricted to Bangkok residents or the elite urban middle class. In short, our data suggest that Thai citizens understood democracy consistently as "liberal democracy."

3. EVALUATING THE TRANSITION

At the time of the survey, the dramatic regime change of the early 1990s was still fresh in the memories of most Thais. Almost a decade after that change, how did the Thai people evaluate their new regime? We found that in every aspect of government performance—be it political, economic, or social—our respondents perceived sweeping improvements from the previous regimes, in particular in comparison to the military junta that controlled the Thai government in 1991 and 1992. Not only was there a significant advance in the level of democracy, but Thailand is also one of the few instances where democratization was perceived to have resulted in significant improvements in policy output. Compared to their East Asian neighbors, Thai respondents were by far the most affirmative about tangible impacts of the transition. Similar findings based upon polls in 2005 and 2006 replicate these highly positive evaluations of government.[3] Clearly, popular evaluations of government performance had little to do with grounds for the 2006 military coup.

3.1. PERCEPTIONS OF REGIME CHANGE

As reported in table 5.1, the Thai people perceived a dramatic transformation of their political system since 1992. Whereas nearly four out of five Thais (78%) judged their past regime to be dictatorial, an even larger number (88%) perceived their current regime to be at least somewhat democratic, with some 43% giving it the highest ratings on the 10-point scale. Whereas the previous regime received an average rating of 3.0, the current regime received a rating of 8.2, the largest increase and the highest democratic self-rating among the countries surveyed.

This perception of dramatic changes becomes particularly important when considered in the context of the reception enjoyed by the military regime in the early 1990s. Although there was significant opposition to military domination of the government, many Thais were supportive of the administration of the appointed prime minister, Anand Panyarachun, during

TABLE 5.1 PERCEPTIONS OF PAST AND CURRENT REGIMES: THAILAND

(Percent of respondents)

REGIME TYPES	PAST REGIME	CURRENT REGIME
Very dictatorial (1–2)	41.3	0.6
Somewhat dictatorial (3–5)	36.3	6.1
Somewhat democratic (6–8)	5.3	44.9
Very democratic (9–10)	2.4	43.4
DK/NA	14.7	4.9
Total	100.0	100.0
Mean on a 10-point scale	3.0	8.2

Notes: Regime types are based on the respondent's ranking of the regime on a scale from 1, "complete dictatorship," to 10, "complete democracy." Scores of 5 and below are degrees of dictatorship and scores of 6 and above are degrees of democracy.

N = 1544.

DK/NA = Don't know/no answer.

this period. The data show, however, that in retrospect, Thais viewed the Suchinda-Anand regime as highly authoritarian compared to the regime in place at the turn of the twenty-first century.

3.2. COMPARING PAST AND PRESENT REGIMES

The positive overall impression of regime transformation is confirmed by specific comparisons of the two regimes in nine areas of political and economic performance. Table 5.2 presents the average rating for each of these domains, the percentages of positive and negative ratings, and the percentage differential index (PDI) between positive and negative ratings. All mean and PDI scores reported in table 5.2 are substantially in excess of 0, suggesting that in all areas of politics and policy, the performance of the new regime was evaluated positively by Thai citizens. Particularly dramatic improvements were reported in freedom of speech, equal treatment of citizens, and popular influence in the political process. Overall the new regime

TABLE 5.2 **PERCEIVED PERFORMANCE OF CURRENT AND PAST REGIMES: THAILAND**

	MEAN[a]	SD[a]	NEGATIVE CHANGE[b]	POSITIVE CHANGE[b]	NO CHANGE[b]	PDI[c]	VALID %[d]
Democratic performance							
Freedom of speech	1.10	0.68	1.9	85.8	12.2	83.9	97.2
Freedom of association	0.83	0.74	3.1	70.1	26.7	67.0	97.1
Equal treatment	0.99	0.73	2.6	78.8	18.6	76.2	97.2
Popular influence	0.96	0.76	3.9	78.3	17.7	74.4	96.9
Independent judiciary	0.55	0.81	8.0	55.1	36.9	47.0	97.0
Average	0.88	0.74	3.9	73.6	22.4	69.7	97.1
Policy performance							
Anticorruption	0.86	0.81	5.6	72.9	21.5	67.3	97.2
Law and order	0.85	0.80	6.2	74.3	19.6	68.1	97.0
Economic development	0.65	0.87	10.7	64.9	24.4	54.1	97.2
Economic equality	0.47	0.83	9.4	49.2	41.4	39.8	97.1
Average	0.71	0.83	8.0	65.3	26.7	57.3	97.1

Notes: N = 1546.

Past regime is defined as pre-1992.

[a] Scale ranges from –2 (much worse) to +2 (much better).
[b] Percent of valid sample.
[c] PDI (percentage difference index) = percent seeing positive change minus percent seeing negative change.
[d] Percent of sample giving a valid answer to this question.

received an average PDI score of 69.7 in its democratic performance and 57.3 in its policy performance. Compared to its neighbors in the region, Thailand experienced by far the most improvement in perceived government performance as a result of democratization, and was the only country to report substantial advances in every major performance domain.

4. APPRAISING DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS

Our data reveal that although Thais are distinguished by an extraordinary level of confidence in their active participatory capacities, they are less optimistic about their political efficacy. Although they place great faith in their public institutions, by and large they are mistrustful of their fellow citizens. On the whole, however, Thai citizens expressed a remarkable level of satisfaction with the functioning of their political system. Nearly nine out of ten of our respondents reported being "very satisfied" (34%) or at least "fairly satisfied" (55%) with the state of Thai democracy.

4.1. POLITICAL EFFICACY

Respondents were asked to evaluate their abilities to understand as well as to participate actively in the political process (see chapter 1, table 1.4). Fewer than 13% of the respondents expressed confidence in their ability both to understand and to participate in politics. Adding another 3% who said they could understand but not participate, only about 16% indicated that they could understand politics. These numbers are unremarkable compared to Thailand's neighbors in the region. What distinguished Thai respondents was their self-perceived capacity for active participation. An overwhelming majority of 84.2% expressed confidence in their ability to participate in politics, and included among these were a striking 71.7% who said they could participate even though they could not understand politics. This was by far the highest level of self-confidence about participation among all countries in the survey, and may reflect the distinctively antielitist character of Thai democracy, as we will discuss shortly.

Nonetheless, when it comes to the perceived efficacy of popular participation, Thais were little different from their neighbors. When asked to evaluate the statement, "The nation is run by a powerful few and ordinary citizens cannot do much about it," only 40% disagreed. And for the state-

ment, "People like me don't have any influence over what the government does," only 42% disagreed. These figures are similar to those from other new democracies in the region. In this sense, the citizenship culture in Thailand bears a striking resemblance to that of Mongolia as revealed in the present survey, or Mexico as famously described by Almond and Verba (1963). In each case, a sense of pride in the power of the mass public is coupled with cynicism regarding the public's actual influence in the day-to-day operations of government. Borrowing from Almond and Verba, such a pattern may be labeled an "aspirational" political culture, characterized by a frustrated desire for influence.

4.2. PERCEPTIONS OF CORRUPTION

While glowing popular evaluations of the performance of the current government undoubtedly contributed to its legitimacy, allegations of widespread corruption—especially electoral corruption—continued to dog the democratic regime (Bowie 1996; Neher 1996; Chantornvong 2002). Thus we sought to determine the degree that the Thai public perceived corruption to be a problem.

The EAB survey included a pair of items probing the respondent's perception of corruption at local and national levels of government (see table 5.3). When asked about corruption and bribe-taking at the national level of government, two-thirds (65%) of our respondents believed that hardly anyone or only a few officials were involved. When asked about corruption and bribe-taking in local government, nearly four-fifths (79%) believed hardly any or only a few local officials were involved. Taken together, only 15% believed that most national and local government officials were corrupt, whereas a clear majority (60%) believed that most officials at all levels of government were honest. Except for China, the level of perceived corruption in Thailand was the lowest in any of the countries included in the EAB survey. The level of corruption reported as having been experienced by our respondents was even lower than the perceptions. Of the respondents in the current survey, only 17% indicated that they had personally witnessed corruption or bribery.

These findings are broadly compatible with those from other surveys conducted in Thailand. A 1999 survey led by Professor Pasuk Phongpaichit of the Chulalongkorn Political Economy Center found that fewer than 31% of respondents reported being offered a bribe in the preceding

TABLE 5.3 PERCEPTION OF POLITICAL CORRUPTION AT NATIONAL AND LOCAL LEVELS: THAILAND

(Percent of total sample)

	NATIONAL GOVERNMENT					
LOCAL GOVERNMENT	Hardly anyone is involved	Not a lot of officials are involved	Most officials are corrupt	Almost everyone is corrupt	DK/NA	Total
Hardly anyone is involved	6.3	**17.2**	4.3	0.6	0.3	**28.7**
Not a lot of officials are involved	0.6	**35.6**	**11.9**	2.2	-	**50.3**
Most officials are corrupt	0.1	3.3	8.5	2.8	-	**14.8**
Almost everyone is corrupt	0.1	1.3	1.6	2.5	-	5.4
DK/NA	-	0.2	0.1	-	0.6	0.8
Total	7.1	**57.6**	**26.3**	8.1	0.8	**100.0**

Notes: N = 1546.

Blank cell means no cases.

Percentages above 10 are in boldface.

general election (Phongpaichit et al. 2000:198), which took place before the implementation of the new constitution. A survey conducted by the National Statistical Office of Thailand around the same time as the EAB survey reported that roughly 40% of respondents perceived a great deal of corruption in government (National Statistical Office 2003:5). This is a higher number than we found—perhaps because of differences in question wording—but still a lower number than the prevalent discourse on Thailand would lead one to expect.

In both the NSO and EAB surveys, residents of the Bangkok area were more likely to report direct experiences of bribery and corruption than persons from other parts of Thailand, particularly those in rural areas. According to the NSO, over half (51%) of Bangkok respondents perceived a great deal of corruption, while percentages for other regions of the country ranged from 35% to 43% (National Statistical Office 2003:5). The EAB findings are presented in table 5.4.

It is important to note the gap between perceptions of corruption and personal experiences of corruption. This is primarily a result of the fact that in most polls roughly 80% of respondents indicated that they learned about corruption through the media. Disparities between perceptions of corruption and actual experiences of corruption are thus attributable to a free press and crusading media. The September 19, 2006 coup was preceded by mass rallies accusing the government of corruption, duly reported in the media. As noted earlier, whether any of the charges had substance remains to be seen.

4.3. INSTITUTIONAL TRUST

Trust in the institutions of the body politic constitutes a major factor contributing to democratic consolidation. Alone among the countries surveyed, over 50% of Thai respondents who answered our questions about trust in institutions said that they trusted every institution we named (see figure 5.1). Since all of the institutions examined in the survey garnered majority support from the Thai population, the interesting question becomes the relative levels of trust Thais bestowed on the various institutions.

As figure 5.1 indicates, Thais expressed a great deal of trust in three of the new institutions created by the current constitution: the Constitutional Court, the National Anti-Corruption Commission, and the Election Commission. Trust in the last of these three institutions was probably dampened

TABLE 5.4 PERSONAL EXPERIENCES OF CORRUPTION BY SETTING (RURAL/URBAN)

(Percent of respondents)

	RURAL	SUBURBS	PROVINCIAL CAPITALS	SUBURBAN BANGKOK	BANGKOK	TOTAL
Never witnessed corruption personally	84.5	83.1	79.9	78.2	76.1	83.1
Have witnessed corruption personally	15.5	16.9	20.1	21.8	23.9	16.9

N = 1536.

by the controversies surrounding many of its rulings, such as the seventy-eight disqualifications it issued in the 2000 Senate elections. Even so, the Election Commission received substantial trust from 70% of the population and the other two institutions even more, suggesting that the foundational institutions of Thai democracy command a large measure of confidence and respect among Thai citizens.

The fact that the military was one of the most trusted instruments of the state, tied with television at 80%, indicates that years of military rule, which included massacres of civilians in 1976 and 1991, did not undermine the public's confidence in the armed forces. In the same vein, the fact that the civil service was more trusted than Parliament may also be a legacy of Thailand's recent history, in which the deeply entrenched bureaucratic state played such a prominent role (Riggs 1966).

At the other end of the spectrum stood the political parties. Yet over half of Thai respondents expressed trust in these important components of democracy, by far the highest level of trust expressed in political parties in any country in the EAB survey. Newspapers received the second-lowest level of trust. What some observers might regard as a wonderfully open and critical press may be looked upon by citizens as a rancorous intrusion into an otherwise complacent society. Placing this finding in perspective is the high level of trust enjoyed by television. It should be noted that some of the most prominent Thai television stations were controlled by the government, helping to facilitate trust in government institutions and apparently reaping the confidence of the public in return. This finding points to the need for more examination of the impact of the media on Thai society.[4]

In contrast to the high levels of institutional trust, we found trust in fellow citizens to be exceptionally low. When asked whether "most people can be trusted" or "you cannot be too careful in dealing with other people," 81% agreed with the latter. Contrary to images of Asian societies as communal, Thais tend to be disconnected from other members of their society. In fact, the low level of trust in "others" is deeply rooted in Thai society and culture, inculcated in successive generations from early childhood. A popular children's story teaches that the lesson of life should be "don't trust anyone."[5] The indoctrination of mistrust has serious repercussions for Thai society, creating problems for the accumulation of social capital. As Danny Unger (1998) observed, based on a variety of other studies (Ayal 1963; Embree 1950; Narthsupha 1970), the ability of Thais to engage in associational relationships is remarkably low.

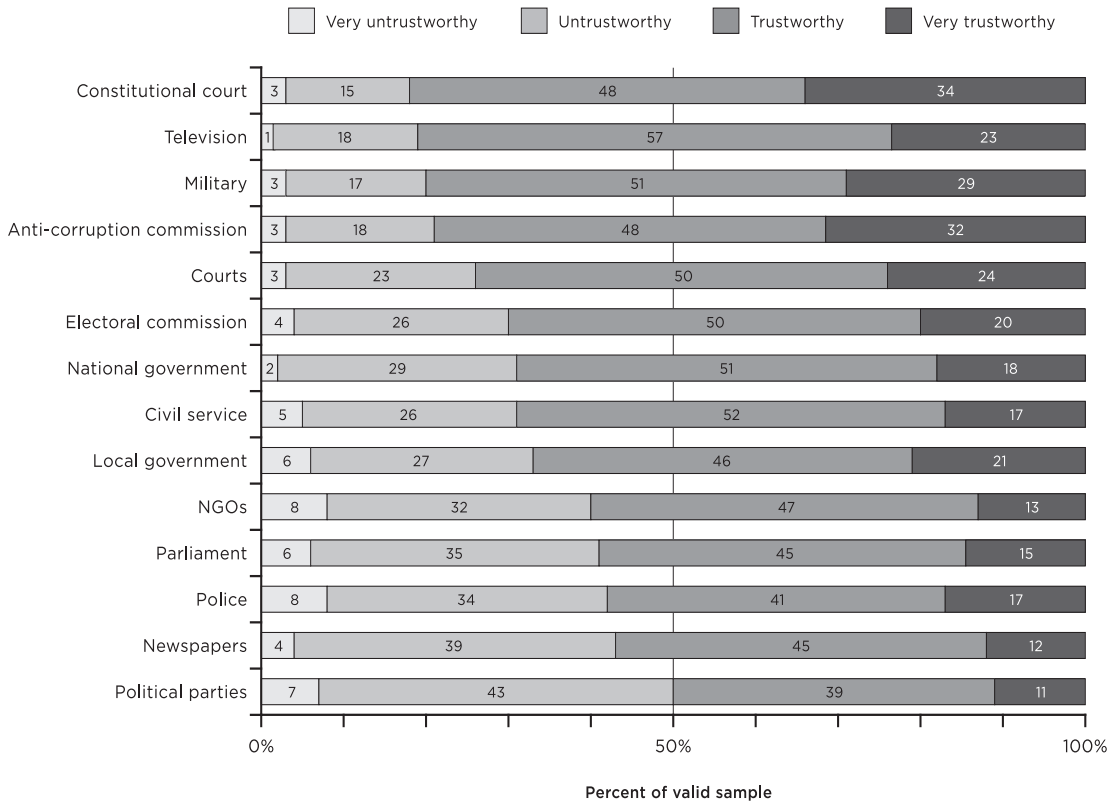

FIGURE 5.1 **Trust in Institutions: Thailand**

5. COMMITMENT TO DEMOCRACY

To assess commitment to democracy we turn to the clusters of questions from the EAB survey tapping attachment to democratic politics and detachment from authoritarianism. We found a robust level of commitment to democracy and rejection of authoritarianism, although like their neighbors across East Asia, Thai citizens were more supportive of democracy in principle than in practice. Moreover, we found poorer, less-educated Thais to be more supportive of democracy than their wealthier, better-educated compatriots, and residents of rural areas to be more supportive than urbanites from Bangkok.

5.1. ATTACHMENT TO DEMOCRATIC POLITICS

The EAB survey found a very high level of attachment to democratic politics among the Thai electorate, as shown in chapter 1, table 1.8. When asked to indicate on a 10-point scale how democratic they would like their political system to be, 93% of our respondents expressed a desire for democracy by choosing a score of 6 or above. Similarly, when asked to evaluate the suitability of democracy for Thailand, 88% believed democracy to be suitable. Furthermore, Thais were as supportive of the practice of democracy as they were of the idea of democracy. Close to 90% expressed confidence in the ability of democracy to solve problems of the nation and nearly 83% believed that democracy is preferable to all other forms of government. These numbers are especially remarkable considering that nearly two-fifths (39%) of our respondents rated the economy as "bad" or "very bad" and only 14% rated it as "good" or "very good."

When forced to choose between democracy and economic development, however, the commitment to democracy was more ambivalent, as elsewhere in Asia. Nearly half (49%) indicated a preference for economic development, while only 17% considered democracy more important than economic development. The question, however, asked respondents to choose between an abstract concept (democracy) and a concrete improvement in one's personal livelihood; therefore, one should be cautious in interpreting these results.

On a 6-point index that aggregates the responses regarding desirability, suitability, efficacy, preference, and priority, the Thai sample averaged 4.0, with nearly three-quarters (79%) of respondents receiving a score of 4 or

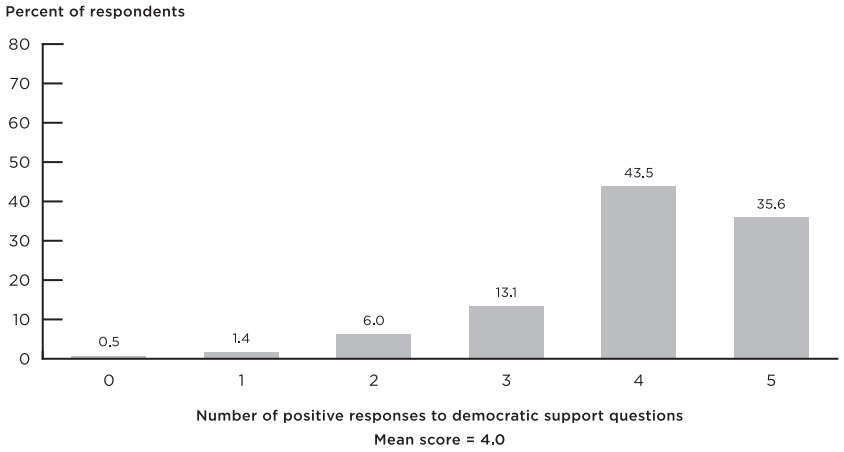

FIGURE 5.2 Democratic Support: Thailand

above (see figure 5.2). These numbers reflect a higher level of democratic support than any other society in our survey.

5.2. DETACHMENT FROM AUTHORITARIANISM

Thai respondents rejected all four authoritarian alternatives by large margins (see chapter 1, table 1.9). More than three-quarters (77%) rejected the dictatorship of a strong leader, 61% rejected a single-party dictatorship, and 78% rejected the dictatorship of technocratic experts. Given Thailand's history of military dictatorships, detachment from military rule was the firmest, with over 81% rejecting this alternative.

Together, rejection of these four alternatives measures the general level of opposition to authoritarianism at the regime level. On a 5-point index of the number of authoritarian alternatives rejected by the respondent, the Thai sample averaged 3.0, indicating that the average Thai was detached from three of the four types of dictatorships mentioned (see figure 5.3). Over 43% were fully detached from authoritarianism, expressing opposition to all four types, with an additional 29% rejecting three out of four authoritarian options, a pattern of authoritarian detachment typical of the countries in our study.

Roughly two-thirds of those accepting one authoritarian alternative accepted the abolition of opposition parties. This finding should be interpret-

ed to reflect the Thai aversion to political parties, rather than as a rejection of democracy in principle. There are many examples of Thai mistrust of political parties, ranging from the ban on party affiliation for candidates for the Senate, to the exclusion of party figures from governmental watchdog commissions and courts. In the opinion of many, behind party labels lurks the shadowy presence of powerful patrons, who purchase political support with their wealth and dispense patronage to produce distorted outcomes in the political process. Many see political parties as part of the problem, not part of the solution, for the construction of democratic governance.

Although no significant differences were found between rural and urban populations in overall detachment from authoritarianism, urban residents were significantly ($p<.05$) more willing to abolish political parties. The banning of opposition parties drew significantly higher support as well among the better-educated and persons of higher socioeconomic status, probably because parties are seen as instruments for mass mobilization against elite dominance of the political arena. These findings thus reflect a fear of popular democracy on the part of the elites, who exercised great influence over the drafting of the 1997 Constitution. When the question concerning political parties is eliminated, roughly two-thirds of respondents rejected all remaining authoritarian alternatives. Support for the abolition of opposition parties must therefore be interpreted in its proper social context, as a desire for "nonpartisan" rather than "one-party" government in Thai democracy.

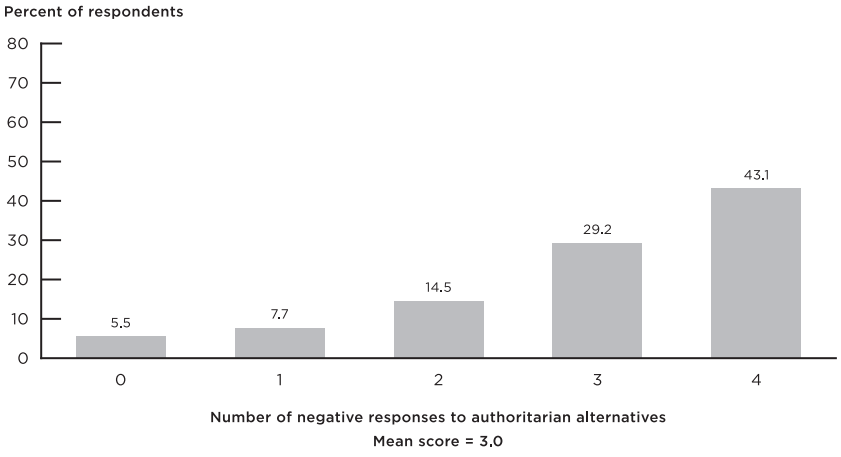

FIGURE 5.3 Authoritarian Detachment: Thailand

5.3. OVERALL COMMITMENT TO DEMOCRACY

Figure 5.4 presents seven patterns of regime orientation, calculated by taking into account the levels of democratic attachment and authoritarian detachment in a formula explained in the notes to table 1.11, chapter 1. The figure confirms the strong Thai commitment to democracy reported throughout this chapter. The country has 36% of "very strong supporters," second in Asia only to Japan, and the highest number of overall supporters (the top three categories, not including skeptical supporters) in the region (80%).

5.4. THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF DEMOCRATIC SUPPORT AND THE TWO DEMOCRACIES THESIS

The data gathered in this study provided an opportunity to test the argument that there are significant differences in support for democracy between Bangkok elites and ordinary citizens living in the *changwats* (provinces) outside Bangkok. A number of Thai scholars have argued that Thailand is a tale of two democracies: that of the sophisticated urban elites with origins or current residency in Bangkok, and that of parochial rural interests that view the democratic process, especially elections, as a vehicle for the advance-

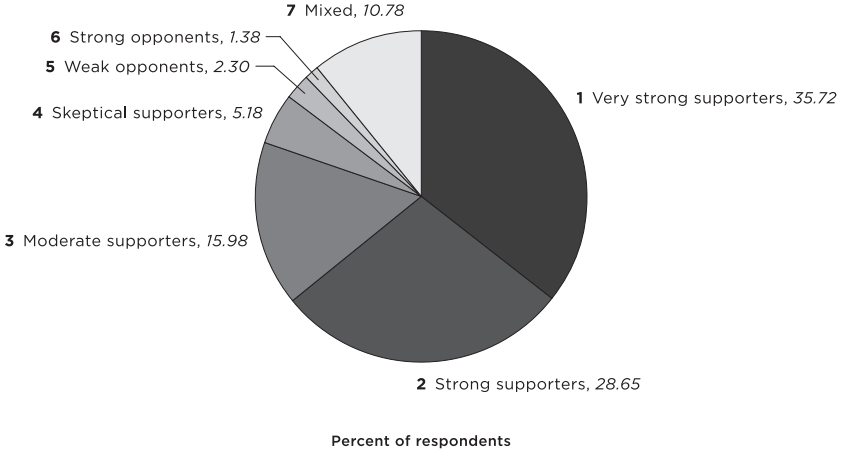

FIGURE 5.4 **Patterns of Commitment to Democracy: Thailand**

ment of personal or community benefits (Laothamatas 1996; Phongpaichit and Baker 2001).

Anek Laothamatas describes the "urban view" as holding that

> voting in farming areas is not guided by political principles, policy issues, or what is perceived to be in the national interest, all of which are regarded as the only legitimate rationale for citizens casting their ballots in a democratic election. The ideal candidates for rural voters are those who visit them often, address their immediate grievances effectively, and bring numerous public works to their communities.
>
> (Laothamatas 1996:202)

As a result, the ability of rural constituencies to acquire substantial power in parliament often raises doubts among the urban middle class, the mass media, and some academics as to the efficacy of the democratic processes. For many members of these groups, "democracy turns out to be the rule of the corrupt and incompetent" (Laothamatas 1996:208). Urban, educated, and cosmopolitan candidates, who may also be skilled policy experts, are often held in equal contempt by villagers, regarded as being alien to rural electorates in tastes, culture, and outlook.

This cleavage is important because historically the stance of the Bangkok elites determined the fates of experiments with democracy. While the middle class opposes authoritarian rule when it restricts individual freedoms and intervenes in commerce, the possibility that the reins of government may be seized by politicians with a populist agenda can pose an even more direct threat than the dangers of authoritarian retrogression. Laothamatas (1996) thus argues that the 1991 coup could not have been sustained if not for support from the urban middle class. The same can be said for the 2006 coup. Samudavanija notes that the role of the middle class in Thailand vis-à-vis democracy has been "reactive rather than proactive" (1998:156).

Some studies (Albritton and Prabudhanitisarn 1997; Albritton et al. 1995) indicate that the differences between urban and rural constituencies disappear when education is controlled for. However, secondary analysis of the data gathered by Logerfo (1996) indicates that even after controlling for education, significant differences between Bangkok and rural areas remain. More recent research (Albritton and Bureekul 2001; Albritton and Bureekul 2002) supports the latter view. Respondents from Bangkok and rural areas were found to differ markedly in a variety of measures, such as support for democracy, criteria for choosing candidates in elections, and tolerance of corruption.

Using the data from the EAB survey, we conducted an analysis of variance in support for democracy, using as the independent variable five categories of location of the respondent. The results were consistent with previous findings showing Bangkok residents to be significantly lower in their levels of democratic support. Indeed, residents of "downtown" (central) Bangkok exhibited the lowest level of democratic support, while rural residents registered the highest.

We also conducted an OLS regression to estimate the relative effects of socioeconomic status (SES) and Bangkok residency on political participation as well as on support for democracy.[6] We found socioeconomic status to be negatively correlated with both democratic support and participation.[7] Bangkok respondents were significantly less supportive of democracy, even when controlling for SES. The results were virtually identical when support for democracy was analyzed by Bangkok residency controlling for educational status alone.

As democracy spreads, the influence of Bangkok (and specifically the Bangkok elites) inevitably diminishes relative to the rest of the nation, which is still roughly 80% rural. Nonetheless, as the seat of government, Bangkok will continue to exert disproportionate influence over the formulation of national policies. This analysis provides a context for interpreting the 2006 coup as the result of the persistent conflict between the metropole and the rural hinterland. The division between the capital and the hinterlands is likely to remain a critical problem in the security and sustainability of democratic governance in Thailand.

6. EXPECTATIONS OF THAI DEMOCRACY

Our last target of analysis is Thai expectations about the future of democracy in their country. In the EAB survey we asked respondents to indicate their expectations about the state of Thai democracy in five years' time. On a 10-point scale, they expected their system to progress toward greater democracy by a margin of 0.8 in the next five years, from 8.2 to 9.0 (see table 5.5). Compared to other East Asian countries in our survey, Thai respondents assigned the highest level of democracy to their current regime and were likewise the most optimistic in their expectations for the future. Nearly nine out of ten (88%) Thai respondents believed that five years into the future their country would be at least somewhat democratic, with 66% expecting to attain near-complete democracy. In contrast, those who expected their government to be dictatorial amounted to only 3.5%.

Based on respondents' current regime ratings and expected future ratings, we identified seven patterns of expected regime transformation (see chapter 1, table 1.12). Forty-two percent of Thai respondents considered the current regime to be an advanced democracy and expected its consolidation as such. Another 28% regarded the current regime as a limited democracy and expected continuing democratic development toward complete democracy. Even among the handful of respondents who regarded the current regime as dictatorial, most expected the transition to be at least a partial democracy. Once again, these patterns confirm the extraordinary optimism of the Thai people regarding the future of their democracy.

7. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Our study demonstrates that Thai conceptions of democracy are not fundamentally different from those of citizens of the advanced Western democracies. As in other societies throughout East Asia, those views of democracy typically labeled "Asian values" were rejected by a majority of Thai respondents.

TABLE 5.5 CURRENT AND EXPECTED FUTURE REGIME TYPE: THAILAND

(Percent of respondents)

RATING	CURRENT REGIME	FUTURE REGIME	CHANGE[a]
Very dictatorial (1–2)	0.6	0.6	0.0
Somewhat dictatorial (3–5)	6.1	2.9	-3.1
Somewhat democratic (6–8)	44.9	21.7	-23.3
Very democratic (9–10)	43.4	66.4	23.0
DK/NA	4.9	8.4	3.5
Total	100.0	100.0	
Mean on a 10-point scale	8.2	9.0	0.8

Notes: N = 1308.

Scale runs from 1, "complete dictatorship," to 10, "complete democracy."

Future regime is five years from time of survey.

[a] Change in percent of respondents rating the regime at the given level when the object of evaluation shifts from the current to the future regime.

One of the most important findings of the study, perhaps, is that in discussions of democracy, Asians and Westerners are talking about the same thing. Nonetheless, many Thais who constitute the academic and social elites often refer to "Thai democracy" as though it contained unique elements distinct from the experiences of other nations. Our research failed to unearth any such concepts that would distinguish perceptions of democracy in Thailand from those of liberal democracy adherents throughout the world.

Our respondents were clear about what democracy is not. It is not benign authoritarianism, and there is no substitute for the key institutions of democratic politics. All alternatives to democratic government were soundly rejected by our respondents. Thailand thus meets all of Linz and Stepan's criteria for attitudinal support of a "consolidated democracy" (2001:95).

Theories of democracy hold that trust in the key institutions of state and society is a key ingredient in the sustainability of democracy. In this respect as well, the underpinnings of democratic support in Thailand appear strong. The relatively high levels of trust in the military, the police, and the civil service may reflect Thailand's vulnerability to its often harsh natural environment as well as various domestic political threats. Such attitudes often characterize rural societies in which the population is heavily dependent upon the coercive organs of the state to maintain basic order and security. Nevertheless, the relatively low level of trust in other Thais is a cause for concern.

As in previous studies (Albritton and Bureekul 2002), we found deep cleavages between urban and rural Thailand with regard to support for democracy. Our analysis suggests that, far from being the vanguard of the democratic transition, Bangkok and its middle-class residents lag behind. For the middle class, the outcomes of democratic politics appear far less predictable than those of bureaucratic-authoritarian rule, and the special relationships with the government assiduously cultivated over the years also become less secure in a democratic polity. Although we found no significant differences between Thais of different social backgrounds in terms of their conceptions of democracy, rural Thais displayed greater commitment to democratic governance as a countervailing power against the dominance of Bangkok elites. In this sense, Thailand at the turn of the century was truly a tale of two democracies.

The conflict over the Thaksin regime that developed after our survey was conducted exposed other significant differences between "traditional elites" and the masses in their understandings of popular democracy. Publicly expressed views of academics and supporters of traditional society indi-

cated that the "reformers" expected voters to support traditional elites, that is, those who were "supposed" to lead the nation. The capture of the government by mass (as opposed to elite-led) democracy brought about a corresponding disillusionment with democratic elections among intellectual and urban elites. The conflict between an emerging, mass-based democracy and traditions embedded in a hierarchical society posed a major obstacle to further consolidation of Thai democracy.

The ideology of democracy is rooted solidly in the consciousness of the Thai people. To the extent that support for democracy in the mass public is an important measure of democratic consolidation, Thailand has the potential to become a beacon of democracy in Southeast Asia. But the Thai case also shows that while popular support for democracy may be a necessary condition for democratic consolidation, it is not a sufficient condition. As Linz and Stepan (1996a:93) note, free and contested elections are not sufficient for democratic consolidation. As in Myanmar (Burma), a small, determined elite can suppress prodemocratic masses by virtue of its control over the military. Although the 2006 coup used corruption in government as a pretext, poll data, even a few weeks before, indicated that the belief in high levels of corruption was not shared among mass publics.[8] Rather, the coup was perpetrated (as in 1991) by elements among traditional elites who saw political power shifting from an elite-led democracy to new classes of people oriented to business and rural masses. Whether the Bangkok intellectual and social elites will ever cede political authority to the hinterland remains the major issue for Thai democratic governance.

NOTES

1. News media reports of widespread corruption are often based on *charges* of corruption, which are often used as a political ploy to invalidate elections. In addition, reports of corruption are themselves made possible by the heightened transparency afforded by the Election Commission and the new election laws. Much is always made of the distribution of money during elections. There is, however, no hard, empirical evidence that such practices bias or determine election *outcomes*.
2. According to Wyatt (1984:250), some thought that the word for democracy (*prachathipatai*) referred to King Prajadhipok's brother and that the word for the constitution (*ratthathammanun*) was a relative of the prime minister.
3. For example, a poll taken by the present authors in April 2006 indicated that roughly 80% of respondents were satisfied or highly satisfied with the performance of the Thaksin government.

4. For a thorough examination of the Thai press, see McCargo 2001.
5. *Phra Apai Mani* (The Guru Teaches Sudsakorn) by Sunthorn Phu.
6. We created our measure of socioeconomic status through a principal components factor analysis of income, education, and occupational status. All of these variables loaded onto the same factor, with factor loadings at 0.8 or above.
7. This is consistent with findings by Suchit Bungbongkarn (1996), who argued that Thais with higher levels of education are more cynical about politics and therefore less likely to participate in the democratic process. He based his argument upon substantially lower voter turnouts in Bangkok.
8. This was a survey conducted by the present authors in April 2006 for the Asian Barometer project.