

Thailand

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Introduction

Thailand has been blamed for starting off the meltdown of Asian markets and currencies in mid-1997, an assessment which may be partly true since the 2 July 1997 devaluation of the baht began a chain reaction throughout the region. The central bank, the Bank of Thailand, has since come under intense scrutiny and heavy criticism for having depleted its foreign reserves and lent just over Bt 1 trillion to ailing banks and finance companies, more than the entire national budget for fiscal year 1997.

Yet only a year or two previously, the general view of Thailand's bureaucracy responsible for economic policymaking was quite different: Thailand was said to benefit from experienced technocrats at the key ministries and agencies, including the Bank of Thailand, and these technocrats were credited with keeping Thailand's own version of the Asian economic miracle on track. Indeed, meddling on the part of elected politicians was the danger that had to be guarded against, as, otherwise, the politicians and their pork-barrel politics might affect adversely the country's rate of economic growth which was so admired around the world. Most members of the political elite would have agreed that it was better to let the technocrats do their work unencumbered by political considerations. It is sufficient to remember that in 1996 the World Bank declared Thailand the top growth country in the world for the decade of 1985–94, ahead of China or South Korea.

What happened? From a prime example of semi-strong government-led economics to international pariah, Thailand's fall by the end of 1997 was as meteoric as its previous climb into the ranks of the near-NICS. Meanwhile, as Thailand's economy fell, the country's pursuit of political democracy accelerated with peaceful transitions of power by electoral means in 1995 and 1996, as well as with the discussion and adoption of the Constitution in September 1997. Thus, in late 1997, having to face both a new constitution and the IMF's aid package requirements, Thailand's political leaders and technocrats were confronted with a new set of rules for both economy and politics.

Political and economic development

After a brief historical survey, this essay will focus first on the nature of democratization in Thailand and in particular on the character of the parties. It will then examine economic governance and the relationship between the parties and the party system and the bureaucracy. It will finally consider the prospects for the future of the relationship between parties and bureaucracy and between democratization and economic development.

Since the fall of the absolute monarchy in 1932, Thailand's pursuit of political democracy has been at best uneven. Prior to World War II, neither the Constitution nor Parliament succeeded in resolving the competition between the military and the bureaucracy: to seize power, political leaders declared new rules of the political game and penalized opponents. From 1945 to 1973, there were only a few short periods of democratic reform interspersed among long-lasting military-led governments which suppressed political participation and manipulated electoral processes.

A crucial change occurred between October 1973 and October 1976, however, when democratic and antidemocratic forces engaged in forceful competition (Morell and Chai-Anan 1981). After student demonstrations had been crushed by a massive show of force on 14 October 1973, young King Bhumiphol Adulyadej dismissed the prime minister, who fled the country together with other government leaders. What followed was a period during which the student movement flourished, public discussion of political and social liberalization expanded, and the Communist Party developed rapidly. In 1975, after the military factions had regrouped and observed the dominoes of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia fall, right-wing elements and students clashed more frequently and with greater acrimony. A coup took place in October 1976, which was characterised by massive violence and acts of torture against students at the hands of right-

wing groups and of the security forces: these events remain a stain on Thailand's collective conscience.

A new constitution was proclaimed in 1978 by the military-led government with the aim of introducing a limited form of democracy. Elections were held in 1979, parties which had survived the 1970s re-emerged, and parliamentary democracy was re-introduced (Girling 1981). Under the tutelage of Prime Minister General Prem Tinasulanond, former army commander-in-chief, Thai democracy, however limited, became more stable: it was not interrupted by coups d'état. Prem presided over several successive cabinets and three parliamentary elections (1983, 1986, and 1988), and attracted the respect of the elites, the press, and the Royal Family. Being tired of the manoeuvrings of Cabinet politics, however, Prem announced his retirement after the 1988 elections: he had been eight years in power, without having led a political party or competed for election. He was succeeded by Chatichai Choonhawan, head of the then largest party in Parliament, who built a coalition government and thus became Thailand's first elected prime minister in 12 years.

Meanwhile, since the 1950s Thailand's leaders had focused on industrialization, with a good record of overall success. Except in the aftermath of the oil crises of the 1970s and the recession of the early 1980s, Thailand's economy grew rapidly. The growth rates for agriculture averaged 4.4 per cent for the period 1970–80, and 3.8 per cent for the period 1980–93. Manufacturing growth rates were most impressive, reaching 9.7 per cent in the 1970s and 11.0 per cent between 1980 and 1993. The proportion of Thais living in poverty fell from 57 per cent in 1962 to just 13.7 per cent in 1992, although the population rose during the same period from 29 million to 57.3 million (World Bank 1996). During Chatichai's administration growth rose to new records and was regarded as sustainable: the NESDB's National Five Year Plan for 1997–2001 was based on the assumption of 8 per cent growth per annum.

However, under Chatichai allegations of corruption against members of the Cabinet became widespread; as in the 1950s, 1960s, or 1970s, coalition partners battled amongst themselves for payoffs and power, while disaffected military factions demanded changes in the Cabinet. This eventually led to a coup which toppled the Chatichai government in February 1991. This type of instability derived from the weakness of Thai political parties is key to a well-accepted view of Thai politics: the "vicious cycle" outlined by Chai-Anan Samudavanija (1982).

Periods of Thai democracy, Chai-Anan has argued, have been short-lived because of the failure of elected governments and the political institutions that supported them. In each cycle, a new constitution was written, political parties were legalized, open debate was allowed, elections were held, and a cabinet was formed. After a short time, that cabi-

net was widely regarded as corrupt and unable to manage the affairs of the nation; the military eventually intervened to end the democratic experiment in the interests of political stability. Usually, political parties were banned and civil liberties restricted in the retrenchment that followed. In this view of Thai politics, the parties themselves sowed the seeds of their own destruction because of their inherent weaknesses (Chai-Anan 1982, 1–5).

Between February 1991 and September 1992, the coup leaders, headed by General Suchinda Kraprayoon, sought to bring back old-style politics. The 1978 Constitution was replaced by a more authoritarian one; promotions in the military and the police were manipulated to ensure support for the coup leaders and their followers; a new political party was created which was expressly designed to buttress General Suchinda in the prime ministerial office. Meanwhile, former Cabinet members had their assets frozen until they could prove themselves innocent of the charge of having become unusually wealthy. These moves were challenged, however, as pro-democracy groups became active in opposing the revised Constitution and mobilized the public against the return to a managed form of democracy led by a general turned prime minister. After the March 1992 elections and Suchinda's subsequent appointment to the post of prime minister, a coalition composed of political parties, pro-democracy activist groups, and students started to demonstrate against the prime minister. These demonstrations were joined by middle-class citizens, workers, and managers who formed what came to be known as the "mobile phone mobs."

The movement against the prime minister reached its peak on 17–20 May 1992 when government forces struck and a bloody crackdown ensued. The repression was halted by the king on May 20: Suchinda was forced to resign, the jailed demonstration leaders were released, and new elections were scheduled for September 1992. The alignment at that election was between those parties which had and those which had not supported the Suchinda government, two camps which the press dubbed "devils" and "angels" (King 1992, Surin 1992). The angels won a slim majority and formed a coalition government which lasted from September 1992 to July 1995 under the leadership of Chuan Leekpai.

Chuan was replaced in July 1995 by opposition leader Banharn Silaparcha, who remained prime minister for just a year and four months up to the November 1996 election. At that election, Banharn was replaced by retired General Chavalit Yongchaiyuth, who in turn resigned in November 1997, having lost the support of his coalition; Chuan Leekpai became once more head of the government. Thus electoral democracy had prevailed in Thailand throughout the 1980s and 1990s, except for one year in 1991–92; in general, governmental crises had been the result of

electoral upsets or had been handled in a constitutional manner by means of reshuffles.

The economic downturn of 1996 and the crisis of 1997

While Thailand's democracy was becoming institutionalized, the economy was sliding gradually into recession. When the Banharn government came to office, Thailand's economy was already experiencing a slowdown: growth was 8.6 per cent in 1995, but 6.4 per cent in 1996, and then turned into recession in 1997. Exports in 1996 experienced negative growth of 0.2 per cent as Thailand's fundamental competitiveness in world markets was coming into question. Banharn's government was composed of mostly businessmen turned politicians and lacked roots in the politically influential capital. Characterized by the press as a collection of greedy country bumpkins, the Banharn government ignored the economic warning signs and did little to stop Thailand's economic decline.

General Chavalit and his New Aspiration Party edged out the Chuan-led Democrat Party in the November 1996 election. Having formed a government, he installed a new team of economic policy makers, but despite repeated warnings from the IMF, Thailand's new leaders did little to guard against the growing mountain of bad debt piling up in the financial system. Instead, they stuck stubbornly to the managed foreign exchange system which effectively pegged the baht to the U.S. dollar. When that peg was broken, the baht weakened sharply and Thailand's economy, which had appeared so strong, rapidly fell into recession. Faced with major criticisms over Thailand's economic woes as well as allegations of corruption against several Cabinet ministers, Chavalit had to face a no-confidence motion in November 1997. In exchange for coalition support in the no-confidence vote, Chavalit resigned immediately afterward so that others could form the next government.

As Chavalit left office without dissolving the House and organizing new elections, both the existing government coalition and the opposition parties were able to engage in a political free-for-all in their attempts to form a new coalition. For several days in November 1997 it was not clear which group of parties would form the next government. Two separate coalitions even held news conferences within hours of each other to declare that a new government majority would be formed. The Social Action Party and the Prachakorn Thai Party were initially claimed to support both camps.

Eventually, the Social Action Party sided with the Democrat-led coalition, and in a rather bizarre twist, most of the Prachakorn Thai Party MPs, not including their party leader, pledged their support to the coal-

tion. Chuan Leekphai became prime minister for the second time on 8 November 1997. Although initially the strength of this coalition government was questionable, a transition has occurred successfully and the prime minister even began speaking of scheduling the next elections for as late as 2000 or 2001.

Thai democratization and party system development

Against the backdrop of a historic economic downturn, questions have naturally been raised about the Thai government's ability to handle the crisis. Such questions would have previously been put to the bureaucrats as, then, parties and parliament would not have been considered relevant. By the late 1990s, however, the functioning of Thai democracy had improved: there had not been a coup since 1991, even if the interplay between parties, coalition partners, and even prime ministers and their governments had not been smooth. The question of whether Thailand's political elite could make the necessary adjustments to the new reality had therefore become meaningful.

Yet, however positively Thai democracy can be regarded, the parties still have to be described as weak in view of their limited organizational structures, their disunity, and their lack of clear ideologies (Chai-Anan 1989; Neher 1987; Somsakdi 1987; Suchit 1990). The Thai political system had been modeled on Westminster, at least since the 1978 Constitution re-introduced a parliamentary system with a fully elected House of Representatives and an appointed Senate. Parliamentary elections were to be held at least every four years, although the prime minister could dissolve the House at any time. The electoral system was based on provinces, each of which was in turn divided into single-member, two-member, or three-member constituencies. As the population of the provinces grew, constituencies were given more seats and/or more constituencies were created. The number of seats in the House thus increased from 301 in the 1979 election to 357 in 1988 and 395 in 1996. Although the Constitution was revised in 1991 and again in 1992, the electoral framework remained broadly the same, whereas the 1997 Constitution was to introduce major changes.

Parties are regulated by the Political Party Law of 1981 which is currently being modified to comply with the provisions of the 1997 Constitution. Until the changes fully take place, the current law requires parties to register with the Interior Ministry, to submit copies of their regulations and a list of their leadership, and to seek ministry approval to register new branches. The aim had been to create mass-based parties by requiring that each party must have at least 5,000 members dispersed

throughout the nation. In addition, to be eligible to compete in elections, parties had to submit a number of candidates equal to half of the available House seats.

The legal requirements and constraints regarding party registration and electoral competition constitute significant barriers to new party formation. Thai parties have been forced into a quasi-mass-based party organizational structure, at least formally, and this has curtailed the multiplication of parties. However, despite the legal requirements, few parties have actually succeeded in establishing (or even attempted to establish) mass organizations which would possess a complex organizational structure, a network of party branches, and a significant number of members. Although the Palang Dharma Party attempted to build up a mass-based party, it failed; only the Democrat Party (the oldest continuous Thai party) can make a credible claim to a network of party branches.

The weakness of Thai parties stems largely from the character of the relationship between these parties and their candidates. Candidates must belong to a party (since 1983), but the parties must nominate a sufficient number of candidates in each election or risk court-ordered dissolution. Since voters do not punish candidates who switch parties, and there are many parties, candidates who are expected to run strong campaigns are in high demand and, as a result, if they leave a party, another will readily accept them. By "strong campaigns" I mean ones in which candidates earned a number of votes equal to or greater than 50 per cent of the vote total of the winning candidate, or, on average, approximately 20 per cent of the total field of candidates (King 1996).

The media play a major role in Thai elections. They typically take a horse-race approach to reporting, focusing on whichever potential prime minister appears to be on top. Television and the press are free; the press in particular frequently reports allegations of vote buying and other types of election law violations as well as the more interesting or entertaining campaign techniques. Newspapers often announce their support for a potential prime minister late in the election contest. As parties have been allowed to advertise on television since 1995 only, election expenditure has typically been devoted to advertising via posters and banners, renting fleets of pickup trucks to enable candidates to tour constituencies, and to direct contacts with networks of vote buyers. Vote buying is without argument for many candidates the largest single expense.

Thai parties have also been regarded as weak because they lack substantive policy stands, let alone an ideology. There are no clear left-wing or right-wing parties, with the exception of the illegal Communist Party; labour, Green, or royalist parties have yet to surface. It has been argued that the basis of party formation in Thailand is constituted by the political

Table 8.1 **Thai parliamentary election statistics, 1979–1996**

	1979	1983	1986	1988	March 1992	September 1992	1995	1996
Parties contesting	36 ¹	16	16	16	15	12	12	13
Parties winning seats	15	11 ²	15	15	11	11	11	11
Candidates	1,626	1,876	3,813	3,606	2,851	2,417	2,372	2,310
Seats	301	324	347	357	360	360	391	393
Bangkok voter turnout ³	19.0	32.5	37.3	38.0	42.6	47.4	49.8	49.0
Overall voter turnout ³	43.9	50.8	61.4	63.6	59.2	62.0	61.6	62.0

Source: Manoot 1986, 1998; Election Reports, Department of Local Administration, Interior Ministry 1992a, 1992b, 1995, 1996.

¹ Parties were not formally allowed to exist until after the promulgation of the Political Party Act in 1981, but parties did exist informally. In addition to groups that called themselves “parties,” there were 28 other groups that submitted candidates.

² After the elections of 1983, independents were not allowed to hold seats in parliament, so that all independents were forced to join parties. The figure of parties that won seats does not include parties that gained seats only after the general elections due to party switching.

³ Figures are percentages.

ambitions of individuals or of factions. Indeed, whether in the 1950s or the 1980s, party policy content has been essentially local in character: each candidate or MP is primarily concerned with such parochial concerns as a new village school, a new road, or donations to the local temple (Kanok 1987; Phillips 1958). According to Kramol, even in the politically charged atmosphere of the 1973–76 period, there was a “lack of clear ideological direction and commitment on the part of most noncommunist elites” (Kramol 1982, 34). As all non-Communist parties pledged their support to the democratic parliamentary system and to the troika of official Thai political values – Nation, King, and Religion – there were no clear distinctions among parties: “non-communist party members could switch parties without feeling that they [had] abandoned or deviated from their ideology” (Kramol 1982, 34). Since Thai parties were focused on electoral victories, party policy was relegated to the more concrete offers of favours that voters appreciated. As Suchit argues:

Parties’ policies and performances were not a determinant of voting behavior, particularly in the provinces. Thus, in their election campaigns, a number of prominent politicians concentrated on their individual policies, achievements, and patrons, and rarely emphasized the party’s performance. They had to set up their own election campaigns and campaign organizations, financing and recruiting their own campaign staff. . . . their election success depended on their own efforts rather than [those of] the party. (Suchit 1990, 261)

The major Thai parties and their link with society

There have been five major parties in Thailand in the 1980s and 1990s. These are the Democrat Party, the New Aspirations Party (NAP), the Chart Thai or Thai Nation Party (CTP), the Social Action Party (SAP), and the Chart Pattana or National Development Party (CPP). There are also a number of small parties.

The Democrat Party

Although it was only Thailand’s second largest party at the time, the Democrat Party led the coalition government formed by Chuan Leekphai at the end of 1997. It is Thailand’s oldest party, its roots dating back to 1945. With solid bases of support in the southern region and in Bangkok, it is probably the party best aligned with the capital’s elite public opinion. Known somewhat derisively as a “party of professors,” its leadership includes a number of Ph.D.’s and respected bankers and diplomats, as well as lawyers and former academics. The party also has a rural wing

consisting of MPs who have often been accused of vote buying and various other types of corruption. With over 150 registered branches and over 300,000 members in 1996, the Democrats may be Thailand's most extensively organized party, but little systematic effort has been made to recruit or register new party members (McCargo 1997). Although the financial markets and business leaders have praised the party's approach to solving Thailand's economic woes, questions have been raised about the future of the party after the next few years of painful economic policy choices that certainly must be made.

The New Aspiration Party

The NAP, led by General Chavalit, was formed in 1991–92 after Chavalit retired from active military service in the army's highest positions. Chavalit's new party was being organized just as the 1991 coup occurred; it was initially thought to benefit from the coup since many military leaders had been close to Chavalit. Chavalit did oppose the takeover, however, and the coup leaders were instead supported by the Samakhitham Party, which was formed with their help. Chavalit continued to develop the NAP in opposition. From a core of ex-military and academic party founders, Chavalit's party grew in strength to win 72 seats in the March 1992 election. In the September 1992 campaign, in spite of being dubbed an "angelic party," the NAP shrank to 51 MPs but was able to join the government coalition. The party eventually defected to the opposition over a dispute concerning decentralization policy, and grew in the 1995 and 1996 elections to 125 MPs, thus being able to form the core of the post-1996 election government and in particular to give Chavalit the opportunity to fulfill his long-held dream of becoming prime minister.

Chavalit's administration survived one year only; it fell four months after the devaluation of the baht in July 1997, having been widely criticized for foot dragging with respect to the implementation of important economic reforms and ineptitude in responding to the economic crisis. Although many business leaders supported Chavalit while Bangkok voters did not, neither the NAP, nor indeed any other Thai party, can easily be linked to particular social groups or social cleavages. On a regional basis, the NAP has included a southern and a northeastern wing. In 1996, the party won 22 seats in the central region and 20 in the north, but had its greatest success in the northeast with 78 seats.

The Chart Thai Party

The CTP is led by a quintessential rural businessman turned politician, Banharn Silapa-archa. Banharn's conglomerate of business interests in

construction and industrial chemicals provided sufficient funds for him to bankroll several CTP campaigns as its secretary-general and eventually as its leader. Formed in the mid-1970s by a group of retired military officers turned businessmen, the CTP has fluctuated from 108 MPs in 1983 to 77 in 1992. It has served in most coalition governments throughout the 1980s and 1990s even though it was dubbed a “devil party” due its participation in the Suchinda government. It is sometimes referred to as a businessman’s party, but the expression is more appropriate for the party’s founders and subsequent leaders than for its supporters. The CTP has usually garnered support from at least two or three major regions, not including Bangkok; it is strongest in the central region. After Banharn’s short-lived government in 1995–96, the CTP shrank to 39 MPs in the 1996 elections.

The Social Action Party

The SAP was also organized in the mid-1970s. It ceased to be a large party in the mid-1980s, typically winning 20–30 seats in a broad cross-section of geographic regions, mostly in rural constituencies. The party’s main campaign plank has been its support for the agricultural sector and rural development, admittedly a policy approach shared by many other parties.

The Chart Pattana Party

The CPP was formed in the wake of the May 1992 violence and the resignation of Prime Minister Suchinda. The core of that government was the Samakhitham Party which had, prior to the March 1992 election, proclaimed its support for Suchinda. Defectors from that party, along with former CTP party leader Chatichai Choonhawan, formed the CPP. The CPP has grown to a mid-size party by winning 52 seats in the 1996 parliamentary elections. Its main strength has been in the north and northeast, although it has won seats in other regions as well. When Chatichai was at the helm, the party’s key election approach was support for an eventual Chatichai bid for the post of prime minister on the grounds of his expertise in economic policy and his skills in international diplomacy. After joining the Chavalit government in 1996, Chatichai accepted only a minor economic advisory role and the CPP’s Cabinet members did not distinguish themselves in economic policy-making or in diplomacy. With Chatichai’s death in May 1998, the party leadership has been passed to his son-in-law Korn Dabaransi and a younger generation of leaders.

It is difficult to say whether the CPP or other Thai parties represent

specific business interests in telecommunications, construction, or finance, for instance, or particular social groups such as manual workers, labour movement leaders, or farmers. Even the CPP, despite its claims to expertise in managing economic policy, did not differ substantially from other Thai parties in the policies which its leaders proposed during the election campaigns of 1995 or 1996. Yet although the links are not obvious, some connection does exist between Thai parties and their supporters. What is more in question is whether these linkages are long-lasting, exclusive, or even significant in terms of electoral success.

Any linkages which exist are clearly not exclusive, however. Major business groups are known to make contributions to a variety of leading parties and to develop reciprocal relationships that outlast particular governments or coalitions. It is difficult, if not impossible, to identify a farmers' party since all parties express support for, and curry favor with, the 60 per cent of the population engaged in agriculture. Nor is there a clear conservative, elite-centered party since nearly every party is conservative in terms of political ideology and support of existing institutions and modes of political interaction. Nor can a labour party or a Green party be easily identified. This does not mean that Thai parties have no linkages with society, but that the linkages are overlapping, conditional, perhaps based more directly on promises of electoral support, and probably organized and managed as much by candidates as by party leaders.

The spread of democracy and the development of the party system

In the course of the second half of the twentieth century, there has been greater support in Thailand for democratic ideals and a greater understanding of the complexities that result from attempts to govern in accordance with democratic precepts than at any other time in Thai political history. Surveys indicate that support for democratic ideals is rather widespread and strong, as against earlier findings that found that few Thais understood the concept or even the Thai-language word for democracy (LoGerfo 1995; Wilson 1962). Support for parties is typically tempered by suspicion. Few would argue that democracy could function without parties or that parties are unnecessary, but their history of fractiousness and of electoral spending violations has resulted in parties having a bad reputation. The actions of the 1991 coup leaders indicate that they understood the need for parties: parties were not banned, and a party was set up as a political vehicle for post-coup consolidation. But their actions also clearly indicate a common attitude among political

elites, according to which parties can be easily manipulated, and easily established or dissolved depending on agreement or discord among powerful politicians. The relatively ease with which Thai parties can be established and the fractious nature of Thai politicians has further contributed to a roll-over effect in which each occurrence of parliamentary elections sees at least one or two parties dissolve and one or two new parties emerge.

Another widely accepted point is that the prime minister should be the head of the largest party based on its number of MPs in the House. This was not the case in the 1980s when Prem was the perennial favorite for prime minister despite the fact that he never held a party post or stood for election. The idea of elections as competitions between possible prime ministers and the link between support for a party's candidates and support for its party leader as prime minister are emphasized in election campaigns. It is widely understood that one must lead a big party to become prime minister and therefore that parties support their candidates at election time even if they do not entirely control or finance those candidates.

The September 1997 Constitution: New rules for the political game

The new Constitution was approved by Parliament in late September 1997 and came into force immediately after it was agreed to by king and published in the royal gazette at the beginning of October 1997. The rules of the political game became in many ways significantly different: there are increased guarantees of individual rights, an elected Senate, a new Election Commission to supervise elections, separation of the elected Parliament and the Cabinet (MPs or senators are no longer allowed to simultaneously hold a Cabinet post and a seat in Parliament), a new electoral system based on a combination of single-member districts and a party-list system, and new requirements for candidates.

Increased guarantees for individual rights

The constitutional guarantees are increased for such individual rights as the freedom of speech and the freedom to associate while a new Human Rights Commission is being set up. These provisions may over time increase political participation, but the 1997 Constitution also introduces compulsory voting. A right to recall MPs is also given to citizens for the first time, by means of a petition which, if signed by 50,000 electors, can

initiate the procedure. Meanwhile, petition signers can initiate a recall motion against an elected MP. Entirely new sections in the Constitution cover the duties of citizens and the duties of the state toward citizens.

Among the more positive rights, the Constitution guarantees twelve years of basic education. Since 1995, successive governments have made such a pledge but the reality lagged far behind and most educators felt that the system of state schools had difficulty in providing even nine years of basic education. The proportion of the Thai work force having received secondary education has remained static at 33 per cent for some years (World Bank 1996).

An elected Senate

The new Constitution has also established an elected Senate to replace the appointed chamber which was in part modelled on the British House of Lords and included military officers on active duty, top-level bureaucrats, leading businessmen, university professors, and labour leaders. In contrast, the new Senate has 200 members elected for six years from single-member districts based on the country's 76 provinces. Senators can no longer serve concurrently as military officers or as any other type of civil servant. The powers of the Senate remain broadly the same: that body can reject or delay ordinary legislation and consider measures designed to implement the provisions of the new Constitution, but no longer has the right to vote on no-confidence motions.

A new Election Commission

The Department of Local Administration in the Ministry of the Interior traditionally administered national and local elections. Under the provisions of the 1997 Constitution, this role passes to an Election Commission. The length of the campaign remains fixed at 45 days. The government is required by the Constitution to ensure that electoral contests are fought fairly by arranging for free radio and television time for the parties, publicizing the election, arranging appropriate access to locations for candidates to campaign, and enabling the Election Commission to carry out its duties. The commission also becomes the official registrar of the parties.

Voting becomes compulsory and the penalty for not voting could include the loss of the right to vote in subsequent elections. A number of concrete provisions are also specified in the Constitution: ballots must be counted at one location in each electoral district and no longer at each polling station; voters are allowed to cast a "none of the above" vote, thereby fulfilling their obligation to vote but being nonetheless able to

reject the available candidates. This opportunity was already given from the March 1992 election onwards, and 2 per cent of votes were cast in this way in the 1995 and 1996 elections.

The new ballot-counting arrangements are designed to reduce vote buying which is considered to constitute the bulk of campaign spending and is estimated in the billions of baht. Counting the ballots at each polling station (there were over 62,000 polling stations used in the last election, or approximately one polling station for every 250 votes cast) allowed candidates to check whether their network of canvassers down to the sub-village level had been effective. By removing the opportunity to do such checking, the constitution drafters hoped to make vote buying less attractive: it will be more difficult to check not only that votes bought were actually cast, but also which canvassers were effective and which might have simply kept the money for themselves. Other anti-vote buying measures include the use of larger single-member districts which will make it more expensive for candidates to pay off a majority of voters.

Even more significant than these measures is the provision for the separation of Parliament and the Cabinet. Under the new Constitution, MPs or senators must give up their seats on accepting a Cabinet post. It has been frequently argued that since holding a Cabinet office is a highly prized opportunity for corruption, a significant number of politicians run for election to Parliament in the hope of being offered a Cabinet post. As the benefits to be reaped by a Cabinet minister are limited only by imagination and skill, it appears highly rational to invest in a House seat by buying votes in order to secure a return on one's investment through corrupt activity. In order to avoid a cascade of by-elections, it is assumed that the parties will select Cabinet members from among party-list MPs and not from those elected in single-member districts.

New requirements for parliamentary candidates

Some new requirements for candidates and MPs relate to the future of Thai political parties. Formerly, MPs expelled by their party automatically lost their seat and a by-election was held; under the new Constitution, such MPs have been given the right to retain their seats if they join another political party within 30 days. This provision may tend to weaken party discipline. For example, in 1993 an MP from the Social Action Party was expelled for frequently criticizing the coalition government to which his party belonged and refusing to heed the party's order to cease making comments to the press. Although this member was reelected on the Chart Thai Party ticket, the party to which he previously belonged was at least able to obtain a degree of discipline from its MPs. Parliamentary candidates will also be required to have at least a bach-

elor's degree from an accredited institution of higher education. This provision sparked considerable discussion since college attendance is still relatively rare in Thailand. In practice, the proportion of MPs holding at least a bachelor's degree has increased from 52 per cent in 1979 to 73 per cent in 1996.

New requirements for political parties

Even before a new political party law is enacted, two changes have been introduced by the new Constitution. First, a party can be established by as few as 15 persons instead of 5,000 as previously; second, parties which nominate candidates for parliament but fail to win seats are no longer automatically disbanded. These provisions could lead to a proliferation of parties and in particular to more small parties competing in parliamentary elections.

In contrast, the new provisions relating to single-member districts and the existence of party-list voting with a 5 per cent threshold clause should reduce the number of parties elected in the House. Overall, therefore, the new Constitution is likely to have a series of rather contradictory effects on parties and on electoral practices.

Economic policy management and the party system

The economy is hotly debated during electoral campaigns in Thailand, yet parties do not differ appreciably in terms of the broad economic policy lines which they support. Discussions on the subject are not ideological, but concrete and detailed. All parties agree about a generally capitalist approach to economic development with a measure of government intervention on the Japanese model. They do disagree over what priority to give infrastructure projects, for instance whether subways or overhead rails are preferable, or whether four-lane or six-lane regional transportation links are necessary. There have been debates as to whether the government's rubber price support policy was as successful as had been claimed, or whether the price of rubber increased simply in response to world market forces, but no party argues that the rubber support program should be phased out. Instead of debating over ideology, parties take turns to respond to local needs and present different shopping lists of infrastructure projects, investment incentives, or industrial liberalization measures. Thailand's decline into economic crisis has focused political debate more directly on economic policy and economic policy-making. Successive governments have tried to portray Thailand's economic diffi-

culties as an occasion for national unity since the currency and capital markets usually react negatively to political debate about the IMF-led US\$17.2 billion economic rescue package.

A few years before the 1997 crisis occurred, MPs had already started to serve in key economic posts. Previously, finance or commerce ministers might be selected from among respected non-parliamentarians and were often non-partisan. Subsequently, MPs gradually came to hold positions such as those of economic ministers and deputy ministers so long as their experience and background seemed adequate in the eyes of the business community.

Under the military-led governments of the late 1970s and early 1980s, parties appeared ready to leave the administration of the economy to experts and to popular prime ministers such as Prem. After the oil crisis of 1978–79, Prem's government instituted austerity measures, brought inflation under control, and devalued the baht in 1984. Both these austerity measures and the currency realignment are usually regarded as having given Thailand a solid macroeconomic base by the time Chatichai became prime minister in 1988 and the Thai economy grew at its most rapid annual rates. It was then commonly pointed out that Prem had relied heavily on technocrats and that they had been able to administer national affairs quite autonomously. Thailand was thus called by some a "premocracy" (Likhit 1988; Neher 1988; Yos 1989).

As in many other countries, Thailand's central bank, the Bank of Thailand, is formally independent although the finance minister has the power to name the bank's governor. A long-standing tradition has placed the Bank of Thailand, the Ministry of Finance, the Bureau of the Budget, and government economic and planning committees above political interference. Parliament has historically had few powers and fewer resources to influence the details of the government's budget or to challenge economic policy-making. Thailand's Westminster-type parliamentary system resulted in Cabinet government, and therefore, no government would purposely endow Parliament with powers that might subsequently be used to challenge or defeat the government.

Beyond the current structural characteristics which bolster the role of bureaucrats in economic policy-making, the history of the Thai bureaucracy's influence and power can be traced back to the formation of the Thai state and to the apparatus developed under King Mongkut and King Chulalongkorn from the mid-1800s. The state bureaucracy has been considered the choice career track for prestige-conscious elites who preferred honorific positions to better-paid opportunities in private business. In the Thai language, civil servants are known as *khaa ratchakarn* or "servants to the monarchy." Until the fall of the absolute monarchy in

1932, state business was considered to be the king's business, and an aura of honor and prestige has remained.

Cabinet ministers as political appointees have gradually sought to control, or at least influence, the state bureaucracy. Yet, until the mid-1970s, most Cabinet members were selected either from the bureaucracy or from the military. The military-led and military-dominated governments from 1932 to the mid-1970s were strongly associated with the bureaucracy (Riggs 1996). The Prem cabinets from 1980–88 included significant representation from the bureaucratic and military elites, not the least of which was Prem himself. The Chatichai government (1988–91) constitutes perhaps the most significant attempt by elected politicians to control the affairs of the state (Robertson 1996).

In terms of “embeddedness” as defined by Evans (1992), or the capacity of the state to penetrate society, Thailand does indeed exhibit the characteristics required at the basic level. The state is able to create the conditions necessary for a market economy: law and order prevail, an infrastructure is provided, the administration is competent. Corruption does exist, as does clientelism, but not to the extent of unduly undermining economic activity.

Evans (1992) identifies at least three elements in what he terms “elaborated embeddedness”: the forums available for interaction between the state and business; the sources of influence available to the state; and the capacity of business to participate in these exchanges. The first criterion refers to the institutional arrangements through which interaction between government and business takes place. In Thailand since the mid-1980s, business groups have been increasingly organized into business associations, and these associations are increasingly functioning with effectiveness in negotiating with the state (Anek 1988). The second element refers to the resources available to the state to influence behaviour in these exchanges. The Thai state has the taxation and legal regulatory powers needed to force compliance to some degree by means of laws frequently designed to direct economic activity. Thus the Bank of Thailand began in 1995 to discourage lending to the property sector, first by classifying that sector as “unproductive” and subsequently by requiring higher levels of provisioning against risk assets. Through the state's Board of Investment which doles out over half of the privileges at its disposal to domestic investors, and its Exim Bank, among other institutions, the state can arrange capital to be made available, allocate funds, or grant subsidies. However, the Thai state does lack the third element which Evans associates with elaborated embeddedness, namely sophisticated sources of information (aside from information on state contracts or concessions) and a broad array of deliberative councils.

Power flows between the bureaucracy and the parties

The following examples illustrate the changes that have occurred in the Thai bureaucracy, in its status and reputation, and in its effectiveness and relative insulation in administering economic affairs in Thailand. First, Dr. Amnuay Viravan, who can be considered a quintessential Thai technocrat, served most of his professional life in a variety of positions in both government and private-sector banking. He became finance minister in the first Chuan administration (1992–95) under the New Aspirations Party's quota of Cabinet seats. Despite high marks from the business community for his experience and expertise, Amnuay came under pressure from NAP MPs who preferred to see elected MPs fill the party's quota of Cabinet posts. Amnuay was forced to abandon his previously valued neutrality and join the political fray by resigning from the Cabinet and setting up his own political party, the Nam Thai (Thai Leadership) Party.

The Nam Thai Party self-consciously portrayed itself as a party of technocrats who could, because of their superior training and experience, serve in public office for the common good of the nation. However, although a number of respected bureaucrats and academics joined Amnuay's party, in order to grow quickly, the party was faced with the same dilemma other Thai parties face, namely to accept rural politicians who could deliver House seats or to be true to its founding principles and only endorse candidates who met the party's high standards. Unfortunately for Amnuay, the Nam Thai Party won only 18 seats, half of them rural, while it failed to win a single seat in Bangkok. Amnuay's view that voters would support highly educated and experienced technocrats was dashed by electoral competition realities, namely the lack of grassroots support networks, as well as the shortness of time to prepare for the next election. Amnuay joined the Cabinet but later abandoned his party to join the NAP. He was reelected in 1996 and led Gen. Chavalit's economic "Dream Team." However, Thailand's economic slowdown and the political ambitions of coalition partners resulted in Prime Minister Chavalit overruling an important economic policy line advocated by Amnuay who subsequently decided to resign.

The Chuan government's (1997–) finance minister, Dr. Tarrin Nimmanhaeminda, and its commerce minister, Dr. Supachai Panichpakdi, have similar backgrounds to Amnuay. Both belonged to the top levels of management in Thailand's banking system before accepting cabinet posts in the first Chuan government (1992–95) as unelected non-partisan outsiders with strong technocrat qualifications. Both men subsequently abandoned their non-partisan status, joined the Democrat Party, and won

seats in Bangkok. They both thus made the transition from unelected, neutral technocrats to elected politicians.

Aside from the transformation of the Thai bureaucracy from technocrat-led to elected politician-led, perhaps the most important factor that has changed the power flows between the elected politicians and the bureaucrats has been the actions of the Bank of Thailand itself. As the nation's central bank, it is supposed to operate independently from the government, administer the nation's monetary supply, and regulate the banking and finance sectors. Before 1995, it was regarded as the best example of Thailand's technocracy working for the good of the nation, but the actions of the bank in relation to the Bangkok Bank of Commerce (BBC) dented this shining armor. The BBC's financial health began to deteriorate prior to 1995. Through venality or simple neglect by the Bank of Thailand, the BBC had to be rescued to stave off bankruptcy. In the investigation which ensued, BBC officials were accused of granting loans without adequate collateral, including to influential politicians, lending large amounts to the bank's top management through a maze of holding companies, and falsifying documents. In view of the Bt 75 billion price tag (then approximately US\$3 billion) to clean up the BBC mess, the reputation of the central bank as a bastion of expert technocrats was markedly impaired.

Following on the heels of the BBC fiasco, from late 1996 to August 1997, the Bank of Thailand provided Bt 430 billion in liquidity loans to a total of 58 finance companies. This information was not made public until the IMF package was almost approved in August 1997. Generally, a firm would only borrow from the central bank if it was having liquidity problems to the point of insolvency. Despite the fact that most of these firms were teetering on the brink of bankruptcy, the bank continued to extend its loans to them until it had lent an astonishing US\$12.3 billion, equivalent to nearly half of the government's fiscal budget. To complicate matters, the bank and the Ministry of Finance suspended operations at 16 finance companies in June 1997, and then at another 42 firms in August 1997. After allowing these firms to submit rehabilitation plans, the bank eventually closed 56 of the 58 firms in December 1997 and later went into the process of liquidating their assets. In March 1998, the bank admitted to having lent over Bt 1 trillion to banks and finance companies since 1996.

In addition to the BBC fiasco and the financial sector rescue costs, the Bank of Thailand also came under intense criticism for its failed defense of the baht. From the devaluation of the baht in November 1984 to July 1997, the bank administered a *de facto* fixed exchange system which pegged the baht to a basket of currencies. Although the exact specification of the basket was a closely guarded secret, it was widely known that the U.S. dollar, the yen, and the mark constituted the core elements, the

U.S. Dollar accounting for approximately 80 per cent of the overall weightings. As a result, the baht floated within a very narrow range and it came under pressure in late 1996 as the currency weakened from Bt 24.5/US\$1.00 to Bt 25.5/US\$1.00.

Speculative attacks against the Thai currency heightened in February and March 1997 as the baht weakened to above Bt 26/US\$1.00. The attacks intensified in May and June 1997. In response to these attacks, to preserve the value of the baht, the Bank of Thailand spent a total of US\$23.8 billion in forward currency contracts, or nearly three-quarters of its entire reserves which at the end of May 1997 stood at US\$33.3 billion. The news of these forward contracts was not released to the public until August 1997 after the IMF package had been signed and the bank was pressed for greater transparency. The attempt to save the baht was doubly unsuccessful: not only was the baht floated on 2 July 1997, but since the bank's reserves were so depleted, no defense of the currency could be attempted, so that the baht weakened to Bt 45/US\$1.00 by the end of 1997.

Within the course of just two years, the Bank of Thailand and Ministry of Finance came under nearly constant attack over the BBC collapse and rescue, the liquidity loans to finance companies, the messy closure of 56 finance companies, and the costly and unsuccessful defense of the baht. With six finance ministers and four central bank governors involved in the process over just three years, the reputation of Thai technocrats has been seriously affected.

Globalization and its impact on Thailand's economy

Apart from domestic economic and political events that reshaped the power relationship between Thailand's elected politicians and its bureaucracy, globalization of the Thai economy has produced new forces and new challenges. The impact of globalization can be traced back to the government's decision in the mid-1980s to adopt an export-led growth strategy. Although heightened export activity brought with it more rapid economic growth, Thailand was also subject to the fluctuations of the international trade markets as its production base was forced to respond to international market demand and to foreign competition. Under the WTO agreement of which Thailand is a member, most of Thailand's protected industries have had to be liberalized progressively. Given the severe economic problems experienced in 1996–97, and the widely held expectation that the Thai economy will not turn around until 1999–2000, the extent of the commitment of Thai policy makers to the WTO liberalization plans is in question, as these plans were agreed upon when

the Thai economy was robust and ready to adapt to international competition.

One aspect of globalization that has come under scrutiny is that of international finance and capital flows. Under pressure from the international community and leading world powers, Thailand began liberalizing its finance sector in 1993–94. Specifically, the formation of onshore/offshore lending facilities increased access to international financial markets. Due to high local interest rates and increased access to international funding sources from 1992 to 1996, Thailand's privately held external debt increased dramatically, to US\$73.7 billion by the end of 1996. Although foreign capital helped fuel 8 per cent economic growth in 1993–95, the burden of this debt after the baht devaluation has proved crushing to Thai corporations. As the baht weakened by over 45 per cent against the U.S. dollar at the end of 1997, Thai government representatives were sent to ask Japanese, American, and other international bankers to roll over short-term debt which represents about two-thirds of the total debt. Furthermore, along with international capital comes increased monitoring by international rating agencies such as Moody's Investment Service, Standard & Poors, and the Japan Bond Rating Agency. Announcements of ratings downgrades by Moody's in particular have on each occasion resulted in slumps in the Thai stock market and increased funding costs for those Thai corporations that could still borrow from abroad.

A final aspect of globalization is the multinational aid package of US\$17.2 billion organized by the IMF and agreed to in August 1997. From that point onward, Thailand's economic policy makers became bound by certain guidelines and goals and were subjected to advice from the IMF, World Bank, and other multilateral and bilateral organizations on everything from financial sector reform to capital market development to the privatization of state enterprises. In some important ways, the IMF agreement that rescued Thailand narrowed the parameters under which Thai policy makers could operate and still maintain the confidence of the international currency and financial markets. By accepting the multinational aid package, Thailand's bureaucrats effectively admitted that the problems were beyond their capacity. Although it is commonly the case that other nations tie their aid to the IMF's support for Thailand, this situation also sends a signal that Thai political leaders are only to be trusted in so far as they can be trusted by the IMF.

These developments have reduced policy choices for bureaucrats and elected political leaders. Thus government spending has come under close scrutiny. Spendthrift projects and even some deals that could have been kept under wraps have come under greater public scrutiny. The spectre of losing IMF confidence is too great to risk for a juicy contract for one's political allies. Opposing sides can now use the loss of IMF

confidence as a potent weapon in their political battles, although on the other hand, opposing sides also criticize each other for giving in too readily or too slavishly to IMF demands.

While Thai politicians have always been sensitive to international sentiment and to the reactions of the international capital markets to local political manoeuvring, this sensitivity has increased dramatically since August 1997. The opposition might have previously criticized the government over economic policy, but when the Thai economy kept growing at 8 per cent or more per year, the criticisms did not carry much weight. Since 1997, a government mistake, or the use by the opposition of obstructionist tactics, can result in a quick and sharp weakening of the baht and in turn lead to higher inflation, higher interest rates, and heavier corporate debt burdens.

The battle at present is over the assessment of blame. Throughout 1997 and into the beginning of 1998, Thai bureaucrats, especially those at the central bank, were quoted frequently in the local press offering their explanations for the Thai economic crisis: the effects of a regional economic downturn, interference by elected politicians in economic policy-making, and the excesses of Thai private corporations. The elected politicians have similarly sought to lay the blame at the feet of the bureaucrats. In the widely distributed findings of the report of the Nukul Committee which was established to investigate the workings of the Bank of Thailand, the central bank's officers and procedures were harshly criticized.

Conclusion: Party development, democratization, and economic governance in Thailand

Thailand has a century-long history of a strong bureaucracy acting with a wide measure of autonomy. In the 1990s, however, democratic processes have become more firmly entrenched. Under Thailand's style of cabinet government, elected ministers (or a few non-elected ministers selected by the political parties) have directed the workings of the bureaucracy to the same extent as in many other countries: ministers may set overall policy directions or goals, and may exercise some control over budgeting, but policy implementation is more problematic. Disciplinary controls are typically limited: ministers may be allowed to promote or reassign top ministry officials, but may not control the assignments of lower-level officials. One factor which has inhibited the development of more extensive control of the bureaucracy by elected politicians is the short life of most Thai cabinets. As a result of frequent elections and cabinet reshuffles, from 1979 to 1998 no coalition government has survived unchanged for over two years. Given that ministers cannot build up networks of loyal

and compliant allies among the permanent bureaucrats within a few weeks or months, the short duration of a minister's tenure strongly constrains cabinet ministers and prevents parties from extending their control over the bureaucracy. Moreover, coalitions have led to a type of cabinet structure in which no single party exclusively controls a particular ministry: ministers of one party typically work with deputy ministers selected from among the coalition's other parties.

Under the 1997 Constitution, the separation of the Cabinet from Parliament could divorce the government from the demands of local politics. As cabinet members are drawn from the House and are elected from small constituencies, they often represent concerns specific to their constituencies or to the regions in which their parties are strong electorally. Under the new rules, cabinet ministers are likely to be selected from each coalition partner's party-list candidates, these being in turn selected from a single national constituency. Ministers will therefore tend to reflect party policies rather than local concerns.

The 1996–97 economic downturn in Thailand is partially a reflection of similar problems in the Southeast Asian region, yet there is sufficient evidence to conclude that Thailand's bureaucrats ignored important warning signs, made poor judgements, and leveraged the nation's international reserves to a precarious position. The US\$17.2 billion aid package granted by the IMF is a clear signal that the economy was mismanaged and that significant changes should be implemented. As a result of a series of errors and mishaps, Thai bureaucrats lost ground to the political parties and to elected leaders. However, Thailand's parties have historically been weak, and only in the mid-1990s has the party system been strengthened and the legitimacy of elections as the proper mechanism for government change been improved. Weak parties with little significant programmatic content may not be able to take full advantage of this historic opportunity. Although the new Constitution provides certain checks on the powerful bureaucracy, many of these guarantees and mechanisms are designed for citizens, and not parties, to exercise.

The end of the twentieth century is a highly dramatic and significant period both for Thai economic policy-making due to the pan-Asian economic crisis, and also for Thai political development based on the requirements of the new Constitution. While Thailand's economy contracts in a significant recession of an estimated negative 4 to 5 per cent in 1998 according to government estimates, unemployment is expected to rise significantly as domestic businesses cut back on labour costs and foreign investors slow projects. Income levels are expected to remain flat or fall as business after business implements salary cuts and the baht weakens against international currencies.

Thailand's experience with more stable government and the institu-

tionalization and legitimization of parliamentary and electoral politics coincided with strong economic growth from 1980 to 1996. When Thailand's economy began to slow in 1996, there were calls for political change and many commentators bemoaned the lack of technical skills on the part of the Banharn government (1995–96). Banharn's short-lived administration gave way to Chavalit's administration which included more qualified ministers with technocratic backgrounds. However, as the economy slowed even further and the baht was floated on the international currency market, there were calls for Chavalit to step aside for one of the respected and non-partisan ex-prime ministers Prem (1980–88) or Anand (1991–92). Another option raised was the idea of a "national government" in which the government coalition would secure an overwhelming majority in the House to provide additional stability.

Although debated in public forums and in the press, both ideas were rejected by political leaders. The formation of the Chuan government in November 1997 to replace the outgoing Chavalit government was applauded by the markets due to the inclusion of several respected technocrats turned politicians. What is still unclear is what will happen when the economy really bottoms out in the months or years ahead and Thais are faced with street demonstrations, in part as a result of the inability of the government to solve the economic problems, given that these problems might be beyond what a single country's government can accomplish. It could very well be the case that the real test of democracy and economic governance is just beginning.

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