THAI DEMOCRACY, 2001

Out of Equilibrium

William F. Case

Unlike democratic transition, the notion of consolidation remains contested. As Omar Encarnacion recounts, the study of transitions was once guided by a consensus that democracy is best understood in the minimalist procedural terms of polyarchy.¹ But with many of the democracies that emerged during the third wave now marked by low quality, the study of consolidation has split between analysts who maintain their minimalist focus on democracy's persistence and those who lift their normative gaze to include the rule of law, greater government responsiveness, popular participation, and sundry forms of social equality. In the first camp are analysts concerned with the attainment of elite unity, political stability, formal civil liberties, and the peaceful waging of elections.² In the second camp, with its focus on reforms and democratic deepening, one finds individuals assessing appropriate institutional designs of presidential and parliamentary rule, administrative decentralization, effective party systems, enhanced citizenship, and class compromises.³ In addition, while the first camp still celebrates the centrality of elite voluntarism, the second dwells more pessimis-

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1. Omar G. Encarnacion, "Beyond Transitions: The Politics of Democratic Consolidation," *Comparative Politics* 32:4 (July 2000), pp. 479–98.

2. The best example is perhaps Michael Burton, Richard Gunther, and John Higley, "Introduction: Elite Transformations and Democratic Regimes," in *Elites and Democratic Consolidation in Latin America and Southern Europe*, eds. John Higley and Richard Gunther (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 1–37.

3. See, e.g., Juan Linz and Arturo Valenzuela, eds., *The Failure of Presidential Democracy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

tically on structural and institutional impediments, most notably, authoritarian legacies, sectarian rivalries, non-hierarchical militaries, and unusable bureaucracies.⁴

Encarnacion also contends that this debate over consolidation is unlikely to be resolved, largely because basic inquiry into what constitutes democracy, until recently privileging the procedural understanding, has now been reopened. In his view,

the mere survival of democracy does not signal that it is consolidated. . . . [I]t seems pointless to place upon [low-quality democracies] the label of 'consolidated' when the political system fails to meet the aspirations of large sections of the population and when considerable space remains for democratic maturing and deepening.⁵

However, by this more demanding criteria, the consolidation of any democracy grows problematic, evinced by the low rates of "confidence" and "trust" in even many advanced industrial democracies today,⁶ even if masking significant *desencanto* by compulsory voting. It is thus not difficult to see why this latter camp of consolidologists is marked by greater pessimism than the first.

Given this impasse over how best to understand consolidation, the most fruitful way to proceed may involve conducting separate examinations of stability and quality, with high levels of both necessary to reach consolidation. To be sure, these dimensions are each fraught with operationalizing difficulties. How long must a democracy persist before it can be regarded as stable? Does a breakdown suggest that however lengthy a prior record of persistence might have been, democracy never really did gain equilibrium? How robust must a democracy's institutions and policy outputs grow in order for it to be classified as high-quality? At what point is quality so eroded through executive abuses, reserve domains, electoral cheating, and social disparities that a democracy slips into a lesser category of semi- or pseudo-democracy? On these issues, too, no absolute thresholds can be specified.

What one can do, however, is measure each dimension for progress, a strategy that permits assessing the dimensions individually as well as the degree of their interplay. For example, a democracy that persists may establish a track record that becomes in some degree self-perpetuating. A democracy that gains quality may set the precedents for additional reform and renewal.

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4. Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

5. Encarnacion, "Beyond Transitions," pp. 487, 491.

6. See Susan Pharr, Robert Putnam, and Russell Dalton, "A Quarter-Century of Declining Confidence," *Journal of Democracy* 11:1 (April 2000), pp. 5-25.

In addition, where these dimensions intersect they may either reinforce or weaken their respective progresses. Democratic stability may help to bolster quality, extending the opportunities for regular increments of reform. Alternatively, democracy may be threatened by breakdown, with quality first dissolving in "backsliding." This causal sequencing can also be reversed, with similarly ambiguous implications. Institutional designs and programs that raise democracy's quality may also enhance the prospects for stability. Conversely, stability may be eroded by increases in quality.⁷

This last permutation of reverse sequencing, with efforts to deepen democracy proportionately diminishing its capacity to persist, can hardly be understood in real-world terms as benign. It remains, however, analytically intriguing. In this scenario, social forces may have grown participatory enough that elites have responded by democratizing their regime. But elites then operate a low-quality democracy, studded with enough delegative practices, reserve domains, and hollow electoralism that their tenures remain secure. Accordingly, O'Donnell observes that in the Latin American setting new democracies characterized by low-quality have been the ones most likely to persist.⁸ It may follow that efforts to raise democracy's quality—vitalizing procedures and producing equitable policy outcomes—will prompt elites to resist in a variety of ways, to the point of testing the new democracy's stability.

Among Southeast Asia's democratic regimes, Thailand's record of persistence is surpassed only by the Philippines. Moreover, since the region's economic crisis in 1997, Thailand has stood out as the country most committed to deepening reforms. This article contends, then, that in conditions of democratic newness, poorly regulated business dealings, and great social disparities, much tension exists between the two dimensions that characterize consolidation, with reforms perhaps threatening persistence. To be sure, top military commanders in Thailand have pledged greater professionalism, making it unclear how democracy might finally be destabilized.⁹ But a new bid

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7. See Samuel Valenzuela, "Democratic Consolidation in Post-Transitional Settings: Notion, Process and Facilitating Conditions," in *Issues in Democratic Consolidation*, eds. Scott Mainwaring, Guillermo O'Donnell, and Samuel Valenzuela (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), p. 59.

8. Guillermo O'Donnell, "Illusions about Consolidation," in *Counterpoints: Selected Essays on Authoritarianism and Democratization* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press), pp. 175–94.

9. While the Democrat-led government was in power, the army chief, General Chetta Thanajaro, vowed to cooperate closely with Chuan. He pledged that "soldiers must stay completely away from politics—no involvement in the formation of governments, no criticism. . . . The coup d'état is outdated. The more time passes, the more it's obsolete." *The Nation*, February 21, 1998, p. 1. He thus agreed first to accept deep budget cuts, then, in accordance with the Constitution, even the loss of the army's television and radio stations, notwithstanding its impact

by big business for access to state power—reverberating in the bureaucracy, amplified through the parties, and resonating among social followings—may demonstrate that democracy's persistence is in some measure contingent on elites finding ways to circumvent reforms. Alternatively, where elites are cornered by democracy's rising quality, they may respond in ways that test its stability, even if calling upon security forces only indirectly.

The aim of this article is to assess the extent to which Thailand's new democracy can be evaluated as consolidated. The brief elaboration of the notion of consolidation that has been presented above and identified two key dimensions of stability and quality is now followed by a review of Thailand's democratic record during the 1990s. This section argues that the character of the country's initial transition poses a stark trade-off, with rising quality now testing stability. The article then gives attention to Thailand's recent parliamentary election, demonstrating that with stability in doubt, democracy cannot yet be regarded as consolidated.

Thailand's Democratic Record

Thailand's most recent democratization effort began in 1992. And in keeping with O'Donnell and Schmitter's celebrated dictum, this process involved a breakup of an authoritarian coalition, with divisions between military classes, rivalries among top business persons, and a frenzied jockeying among party leaders leaving the collectivity vulnerable to popular upsurge amid a more widely resurrected civil society. Indeed, through a violent upsurge known as Black May, the military was forced from power in ways that correlate most closely with bottom-up "replacement." Further, because such replacement promises far-reaching reforms that threaten the "inviolable" interests of military and business elites, one recalls its having been diagnosed by Huntington as the mode of transition least likely to stabilize.¹⁰

As path-dependent theorists would predict, the elections held in Thailand at the end of 1992 produced a Democrat Party-led government that, quite against its initial preferences, began work on deepening constitutional reforms. But several factors combined to prevent—or at least delay—any authoritarian backlash. First, the military appears to have been disheartened by its ineptitude in managing, however briefly or indirectly, an increasingly sophisticated political economy.¹¹ It had also been chastened by the intensity of monarchical and middle-class recrimination that had resulted. The mili-

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on military revenues. *Bangkok Post*, March 11, 1998, p. 2. See also statements by Supreme Commander Sampao Chusri during the campaigning for the 2001 election, *Bangkok Post*, December 29, 2000, p. 3.

10. Huntington, *The Third Wave*, p. 276.

11. Peter Alford, Bangkok correspondent for *The Australian*, personal communication, December 28, 2000.

tary thus retreated humbly to the barracks, though it retained a compensatory presence in some key state enterprises and corporate boardrooms.

Second, though many of Thailand's Bangkok-based business elites had supported the military while in power, they were soon counterpoised by provincial businessmen who lent their weight to the democratic transition. Indeed, shadowing the resurrection of civil society was a surge in provincial business—especially as Thailand entered its economic boom. However, if provincial business favored formal democracy as a way to establish conduits to parliament and state power, it afterward obstructed the reform process in order to keep its new conduits open. Indeed, provincial business soon flourished even within the Democrat Party, enabling it to dampen the reformist impulse. In sum, pressures for authoritarian backlash were offset by the weakness of the military, then made redundant by the capacity of provincial business to limit democracy's deepening.

Hence, with business as usual, the Democrat-led government reverted to past practices, which eventually led to its collapse brought on by a land scandal. Elections held in mid-1995 produced a new government led by the Chart Thai Party but harnessed still more plainly to the interests of provincial business. And this government soon collapsed too, foundering in disagreements over which local *jao pho* (godfather) should gain the interior ministership while key regulatory agencies were run down. It was this chain of events that, through elections in late 1996, brought the New Aspiration Party (NAP) to power, with the party alloying its base in provincial business with more direct mobilizations of farmworkers in the country's impoverished northeast.

Of course, even as an authoritarian backlash was avoided in these ways, the social forces that had sparked the transition by replacement continued to pursue democratic reforms. Indeed, they were helped in this by the economic crisis of 1997–98, which imbued the reform process with a greater sense of urgency while subduing elites in a new mood of forbearance. Thailand's economic crisis thus appeared to have multiple positive effects, advancing progress on consolidation's twin dimensions of stability and quality.

More specifically, in early 1997 the Constitutional Drafting Assembly was convened. This group mainly involved metropolitan business elites, who sought to contain their provincial rivals, as well as academics, lawyers, and NGO leaders who were trying to deepen democratic reforms.¹² These elements reached a "subtle compromise" and drafted the so-called People's Constitution that as shall be shown promised greatly to enhance democratic

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12. Pasuk and Baker, *Thailand's Crisis* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2000), pp. 116–17. It appears too that the motivations of many Democrats for seeking constitutional reforms were tainted by their expecting to gain electoral advantages over the NAP. The fact that drafting the new charter was thus shifted from parliament to an independent assembly indicates the gathering strength of the drive for quality. I thank an anonymous referee for this insight.

quality. Accordingly, when the charter was presented to parliament for adoption, it met with resistance from the NAP-led government, linked tightly to provincial business.¹³ The government was also joined by a powerful roster of allies, including elements in the military that feared additional limits on their prerogatives; the Interior Ministry, whose control over general elections and powers over local appointments stood to be reduced by a new independent commission and elections at the local level; and most ruling coalition members and provincial businessmen, whose collaborative activities would be exposed through new forms of oversight. On the other side, though, the Democrat Party supported the draft constitution, having partly rid itself while in opposition of provincial businessmen in order to take on a more technocratic guise. The Democrats thus led a tactical and temporal alliance made up of the metropolitan business elites and political activists enumerated above.

As the political confrontation deepened, Thailand was struck in the middle of the year by its economic crisis.¹⁴ After a 40-year run of nearly continuous growth, Thailand now had to watch as its currency collapsed, prompting massive capital flight, pushing down stock values, and plunging financial institutions and corporations into insolvency. Indeed, among the Southeast Asian countries hit by the crisis as it spread around the region, only Indonesia fared worse. However, these events discredited old ways of conducting business and politics and gave new impetus to Thailand's reform process. They motivated more elites to cooperate in passing the new Constitution. On this score, Dogan and Higley have mapped the ways in which disunified elites, when confronted by pivotal crises, may be encouraged to reorganize their relations along more conciliatory lines, even reaching a settlement on their most fundamental differences.¹⁵ Crises diminish the worth of high positions and assets, prompting elites to recognize that only by sharing power can they hope in some degree to retain it. In these conditions, a regime may gain new stability. Further, Burton et al. contend that in reasonably developed settings, elites may be induced to share power also with social forces that have grown participatory.¹⁶ In these circumstances, a regime may be democratized, too.

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13. For good accounts of the difficult passage of the "People's Constitution," see Duncan McCargo, "Alternative Meanings of Political Reform in Contemporary Thailand," *Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 13 (1998); and Pasuk and Banker, *Thailand's Crisis*, pp. 119–22.

14. In reflecting on the crisis, prominent academic and constitution drafting assembly member Suchit Bunbongkarn observed, "We have never faced anything like this before." Interview, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, April 23, 1998.

15. Mattei Dogan and John Higley, *Elites, Crises, and the Origins of Regimes* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998).

16. Burton et al., *Elites and Democratic Consolidation*, pp. 20–22.

These insights give grounds for optimism over the consolidation of Thailand's democracy. As popular pressures mounted for the Constitution's passage, largely taking the form of middle-class protests, a harried NAP-led government contemplated declaring a state of emergency. The military refused to oblige, however, favoring a broader configuration of elite cooperation and restraint—an important milestone in democratic persistence. The prime minister then relented on the Constitution, thus signaling also a sharp increase in reform. He resigned shortly afterward and when his coalition was unable to agree on a successor, it peacefully transferred power to the Democrats. In consequence, new elite cooperation brought progress in terms of democratic stability. New accommodations with social forces raised democratic quality. What is more, the new Democrat-led government's political reforms were paralleled by reforms in the financial sector, promising improved corporate governance, while winning the acclaim of multilateral agencies.

To sum up this section, Thailand's democratizing progress appears to correlate with a rough composite of theoretical insights, though with important qualifications. A breakup of the authoritarian coalition, coinciding with popular upsurge, heralded a democratic transition. Further, because this amounted to a transition by replacement, one could anticipate far-reaching reforms, thus jeopardizing persistence. Rising quality, one must remember, threatens stability. However, this outcome was delayed by the depth of the military's retreat, made bearable to the officer corps by its retaining some of its most cherished domains. In addition, the collectivity of business elites was split, with important elements of provincial business regaining their pre-eminence in political parties, enabling them to circumvent or dampen reforms. A humbled military and a divided bourgeoisie, important segments of which were back in the saddle, were thus unlikely to deliver the expected authoritarian backlash, at least any time soon.

Shifting to the social level, this hiatus in the causal sequence was also extended by the rapid economic growth that Thailand continued to enjoy, even as the country's export manufacturing mutated into a pernicious asset bubble. Thus, while social forces matured into civil society, even helping to produce a new constitution, many of their grievances were tempered by greater opportunities for urban careerism and consumerism. Moreover, if the economic crisis later invigorated social forces, it also encouraged restraint among elites, thus auguring well for democratic stability. And with elites finally consenting to the reformist Constitution, then peacefully transferring power to the Democrats, they also raised democratic quality. Thus, a transition that had begun with the breakup of an authoritarian coalition drew closer to consolidation rooted in elite moderation, the accommodation of civil soci-

ety, new institutional designs, and the promise of more efficient and equitable policy outputs.

But under what conditions might the tensions associated with transition by replacement recur and intensify, with increases in democratic quality finally testing stability? Many analysts surveying East Asia during its economic crisis concluded that where it was practiced, democracy showed great resilience, with peaceful changes of government in Thailand, the Philippines, and South Korea contrasting with the violent demise of the New Order in Indonesia and the upsurges in Malaysia.¹⁷ Still unexplored, however, are questions about democracy's fate after subsequent governments prove unable to restore rapid economic growth. In short, while crisis may moderate elite behaviors, its prolongation or partial resolution may rekindle the disunity between once stunned, now fully conscious elites. And as these elites again grow restless and resume their probes and maneuvers, they may bump up against democracy's new reforms, with some elements finally pondering actions that threaten persistence.

In Thailand, the Democrat-led government that had taken over from the NAP completed the full term of parliament, the first government ever to do so. And throughout its time in office, the Democrat Party conducted its affairs in ways that mostly conformed to the new Constitution. Indeed, when the party's secretary-general and deputy prime minister, Sanan Kachornprasart, was found by the National Counter Corruption Commission (NCCC) to have behaved corruptly, he promptly resigned, an unprecedented action that was hailed as a challenge to Thailand's elite-level "culture of impunity."¹⁸ And yet, while largely committed to reforms, the Democrats made compromises over time that may have stunted the country's economic recovery. Stephan Haggard notes, for example, that in order to extend its tenure, the government accepted a new member, the Chart Pattana Party, into its coalition, then awarded ministerships to the party's provincial politicians despite "their less than sterling reputation."¹⁹ And in swiftly reverting to old practices, Chart Pattana then used its ministerial posts and seats in the Senate to ward off reform measures that impinged on its leaders' business dealings.

Likewise, metropolitan business elites, though still loosely associated with the Democrats, mounted rearguard resistances to any significant restructuring of their banking and business activities. Further, at the social level workers from state enterprises demonstrated against the privatizations that the government undertook, while those in the corporate sector reacted to retrenchments with violence. Farmworker groups from the impoverished northeast marched

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17. See, e.g., Haggard, *Asian Financial Crisis*, pp. 11, 14.

18. Laura Thornton, Senior Program Officer for Thailand, National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, personal communication, January 8, 2001.

19. Haggard, *Asian Financial Crisis*, p. 99.

on Government House, providing the opposition with new opportunities for censure motions and mass-level mobilizations. In these circumstances, the government relaxed its economic reforms, shifting its emphases from financial sector restructuring to low interest rates and from taking deregulatory measures to creating social safety nets, however scant. As a consequence, Thailand appeared to emerge slowly from its crisis in 1999, but its economy was not projected to regain its pre-crisis size for several more years. Growth rates remained approximately half what they had been during the boom.

Hence, in thinking about the conditions under which the hypothesized tradeoff between persistence and reform might resume, one needs to remove from the matrix of variables Thailand's extraordinary economic boom and subsequent utter collapse, for these elements distorted the country's normal sociopolitical trajectory. On this count, one observes that the Democrat-led government helped lift the economy to modest levels of probably sustainable growth, but regenerated neither the great prosperity that gladdens elites nor perpetuated the crisis that tames them. Further, if the economic crisis had given pause to the country's long record of elite rivalries, there is no evidence that it produced any lasting elite settlement or even any sectional pact making. Instead, the refusal of the military to intervene in politics when invited by the NAP, though obviating an outright coup, simply masked more subtle but ongoing tensions in elite-level relations. Hence, the ending of crisis coupled with shortfalls in growth poses finally the parameters in which elites—their surging ambitions running against democratic reforms—may find their earlier acceptance of new democratic quality slipping now into a contingent semi-loyalty.

The 2001 Election

As Anek Laothamattas observes, studying elections in institutionalized democracies fails to interest most comparativists.²⁰ Elections in these circumstances are dismissed as a matter of transient winners and losers and ephemeral party platforms, remaining inside the bounds of well-trodden regimes. Anek notes also, however, that in less institutionalized settings elections can provide meaningful insights into a regime's broader prospects for continuity and change. In Thailand, the House of Representatives election in January 2001 marked the first to be waged by the terms of the new Constitution. It also took place in a context of quite modest economic recovery. Accordingly, the election affords opportunities for an early examination of the

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20. Anek Laothamattas, "A Tale of Two Democracies: Conflicting Perceptions of Elections and Democracy in Thailand," in *The Politics of Elections in Southeast Asia*, ed. R. H. Taylor (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 201.

extent to which Thailand's elites might recoil from democratic quality and jeopardize stability, once again extending the causal pathway that began in transition by replacement. The assessment here begins by reviewing some of the constitutional reforms that elites encountered.

The People's Constitution

Thailand's new charter, the People's Constitution, encouraged horizontal accountability, with independent state agencies now checking government activities. Most notably, the judiciary was strengthened through the introduction of a constitutional court possessing the power of judicial review as well as an administration court to oversee bureaucratic affairs. Moreover, an Election Commission was set up that took over the Interior Ministry's electoral role, while the existing NCCC was vastly strengthened. New provisions for a human rights commission, an ombudsman, and a freedom of information act also gave evidence of a greater vertical responsiveness in the government.

The Constitution also posed deep changes to the National Assembly and its electoral procedures, which were chiefly designed to strengthen the party system and improve governance. The number of seats in the lower house, the House of Representatives, was increased to 500, with 400 of them elected from single-member districts that had been newly converted from multimember constituencies in order to encourage party cohesion and greater voter equality. The remaining 100 seats were to be filled through a party list system, thereby strengthening party leadership but also forcing regional parties to broaden their appeals. In addition, barriers were placed on party hopping and the collection of transfer fees, with individuals required to be members for 90 days before they could stand as their party's candidate. They were also subjected to new educational standards, with candidates required to possess university degrees. Further, once elected, parliamentarians would henceforth be barred by the Constitution's Article 111 from influencing appointments, promotions, and transfers in the civil service and police, long a reliable means for their exchanging favors. And their no-confidence motions, so perfunctorily introduced in the past, had now to be supported by 200 representatives and accompanied by a serious nomination of an alternative prime minister.

At another level, those who aspired to ministerial posts would be required to win election through a party list and then resign from the Assembly, sparing them the demands of constituency pork barreling and thus boosting their attentions to the national good. They would also have to declare their personal assets as a condition for their entering the cabinet. Meanwhile, the 200 seats in the Senate, a body used habitually by entrenched interests to check lower house measures, would for the first time be directly elected, rather than

appointed by the prime minister as in the past. Further, in contesting the Senate elections, candidates would be barred from holding bureaucratic positions or even party memberships, thereby weakening pernicious old links between politics and business. On this score, one notes that when Senate elections were held in March 2000, the Constitution's relevant provisions were faithfully implemented to the point of annulling the victories of 200 candidates tainted by vote-buying, thus demanding four additional rounds of elections over a period of five months.²¹ Finally, local level officials, previously appointed by the interior minister, would henceforth be directly elected too, commencing the process of decentralization.

The Constitution also ranged widely across the social terrain, obliging the state to provide national health care, welfare, and 12 years of public schooling.²² Other clauses called for consumer rights, gender equality, protection from domestic violence, and consultations with relevant NGOs over projects having environmental impact. In consequence, the charter's sweeping reforms promised to do much in raising the quality of Thailand's democracy. But because it so profoundly challenged the attitudes and behaviors of many elites, one could speculate that in the post-crisis setting either loopholes would be found or democracy's persistence would be tested.

The Campaign

Thailand's Democrat-led government dissolved the Assembly in November 2000, within the timeframe specified by the new Constitution. The Election Commission then scheduled the lower house contest for January 6, 2001. Nearly 3,800 candidates from 37 parties competed for the 500 seats on offer. Public commitment was regarded as high, with an approximately 70% turnout recorded among the country's 44 million eligible voters.

Though the Democrats had steadily advanced political reforms during their recent tenure, their modest economic performance and social policy aloofness now alienated most constituencies. Many metropolitan business elites had grown impatient with the government's placing greater store on deregulating the financial sector than restarting the real economy. And though the government gradually shifted its attention to mild kinds of subsidies, metropolitan business elites grew increasingly distant. In addition, provincial business elites were frustrated by the government's reining in expenditures on public works. Similarly, the rural *jao pho* with whom provincial business elites fre-

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21. For a good analysis, see Surin Maisrikrod, "Political Reform and the New Thai Electoral System: Old Habits Die Hard?" in *How Asia Votes*, eds. David Newman and John Fuh-sheng Hsieh (New York: Chatham House, 2000).

22. A permanent committee adviser and university academic stated in a discussion, "We knew when these things were written that they probably couldn't be paid for." Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, April 10, 1998.

quently were allied watched haplessly as many of their illegal enterprises contracted. Bangkok's middle class, too, while having earlier been gratified by the passage of the new Constitution and the ascendancy of the Democrats, now despaired over the economy's lassitude. And organized labor and farmer groups, deriving little from the government's deregulatory measures save industrial sector retrenchments and rising rural debt, grew steadily more militant. Thus, the Democrat Party, in alienating many urban and rural constituencies alike, then mounting a campaign assessed as stale and defensive,²³ appeared to retain only its most committed middle class constituencies in Bangkok and its traditional supporters in the south.

Into the breach stepped Thaksin Shinawatra, frequently billed as Thailand's richest man. Thaksin had gained some hurried though high-level political experience during the mid-1990s, serving briefly as foreign minister and then twice as deputy prime minister as he revolved through a variety of parties and governments. His background was more distinguished, however, by his business dealings, commencing with an exclusive contract to supply the police department with computers during the early 1980s that was followed by the use of his new revenues to form the Shinawatra group of companies. And in deepening links to top politicians, Thaksin's companies won government concessions to operate the country's telecommunications satellites and mobile phone and pager networks, enabling him rapidly to expand his wealth. It was reported too that unlike Thailand's other business elites, Thaksin was unaffected by the economic crisis, having been forewarned of the baht's flotation by the NAP finance minister at the time, enabling him safely to hedge his dollar borrowings.²⁴

Historically, of course, many Bangkok-based business elites had increased their holdings through government connections. But never had they gone on to bid directly for the prime ministership. Only provincial businessmen had done this successfully, drawing upon their local machines and *jao pho* networks. It was these behaviors, as noted earlier, that had antagonized metropolitan business elites and prompted them to support the constitutional reforms. Hence, Thaksin, in using government connections to build up his metropolitan business interests and then his wealth as a springboard to the prime ministership, introduced new permutations into the bases for elite statuses and the conduct of Thai politics.

After abandoning the Palang Dharma party in 1997, Thaksin founded a new political party, Thai Rak Thai ("Thai Loves Thai"). Over the next two years, he used his vast wealth to attract a large bloc of sitting representatives

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23. *Asian Wall Street Journal*, January 5–7, p. 1.

24. Discussions with Thai academics and foreign journalists, Bangkok, January 2001.

from other parties, a practice known locally as *duut* ("the suck").²⁵ In its last stages, this recruitment was made possible by the Election Commission's suspension of the no-hopping rule in order to hasten the extinction of small parties. In consequence, a decision meant to strengthen the party system served instead to highlight the system's weaknesses, enabling a two-year-old vehicle untested by elections to claim a de facto plurality in parliament through mass defections. Further, through the transfer fees this involved, the *duut* contributed to what finally was estimated to be Thailand's most expensive election, despite its taking place amid new electoral rules and a moribund economy.

In readying his new party for electoral victory, Thaksin fashioned a series of appeals conceptualized by many analysts as populist, mostly because of the fiscally dubious programs that he proposed for the poor. Populism is often dismissed as an analytically imprecise term, evoking disparate experiences ranging from rural American politics at the turn of the century to urban politics in South America and southern Europe during the inter-war period.²⁶ Populist mobilization also produces ambiguous outcomes, in some cases invigorating democratic procedures, at other times unleashing authoritarian pressures, with some variants even shading into fascism. However, populist experiences do display commonalities, namely, the presence of a charismatic leader who forges a cross-class coalition that links elements of sullen big business, insecure small proprietors, and alienated mass audiences and then binds them together in wounded nationalist pride. In addition, the leader usually promises quick statist solutions for failing free markets, offering government funding for industrialists who cooperate and redistributive schemes for the dispossessed.

With the opportunities afforded at this juncture by Thailand's political and structural conditions, Thaksin chose strategies that indeed correspond to the notion of populism. Of course, in his most boisterous appeals Thaksin called for aggressive entrepreneurship, declaring it of higher priority than political reforms, given the country's economic travails. But in later embroidering his message with populist themes, he proposed less entrepreneurial ruggedness than public assistance. Specifically, Thaksin canvassed a national asset management company, relieving big banks of their non-performing loans while easing the terms of restructuring for corporate debtors. He also outlined new equity funds and intimated some vague forms of protection from global competition. Further, in attempting to bridge the gap between metropolitan and

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25. Peter Alford, "Thailand: Magnate Suck in Thai MPs," *The Australian*, April 28, 2000, p. 7.

26. See Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner, eds., *Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1969); Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*; *Capitalism, Fascism, Populism* (London: New Left Books, 1977); and Margaret Canovan, *Populism* (London: Harcourt, Brace, and Jovanovich, 1981).

provincial business, he promised a new bank geared to small and medium-sized enterprises. But most notable were Thaksin's pledges to farmworkers, involving a three-year moratorium on debt repayments to the bank from which they had mostly borrowed, the state-owned Bank of Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives (BAAC), a revolving credit scheme of one million baht for each of the country's 77,000 villages, and a generous state subsidy for medical treatment.

Hence, alongside the Democrat's dull commitments to austerity, Thai Rak Thai's platform shimmered with populism. The new party thus won over metropolitan business elites who, even if doubting the wisdom of restoring close government-business relations with the intrinsic risks of moral hazard, were keen to be associated with a winner.²⁷ A prominent example was Dhanin Chearavonont, head of Charoen Pokphand, Thailand's largest conglomerate. Meanwhile, big banks still encumbered by bad loans, in particular Bangkok Bank and Bank of Ayudhya, stood to benefit more concretely, drawing upon the proposed asset management company.²⁸ Thus, the chairman of Bangkok Bank, Chattri Sophonpanich, opined, "Mr. Thaksin is someone who can make decisions quickly, someone who I believe is suitable for helping address the problems we face now."²⁹ At the same time, Thai Rak Thai appealed to some provincial business people, though less strongly, as Thaksin was likely to require their forfeiting some local autonomy to the center. Accordingly, where Thai Rak Thai was unable to work through local potentates, it simply bypassed them, its offer of debt relief resonating profoundly with a vast clientele of farmworkers below.³⁰

Days before the election, however, the NCCC again bared its teeth, recalling the earlier episode involving the Democrat's secretary-general, Sanan. After months of investigation, the commission determined that Thaksin, while serving as deputy prime minister in 1997, had shifted equity holdings into the hands of relatives and servants in order to avoid the full disclosure of assets that was required by the new Constitution. In an 8-1 decision, Thaksin was indicted and his case forwarded to the constitutional court. Based on Sanan's case, proceedings were expected to take four-to-six months. Hence,

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27. Peter Alford, Bangkok correspondent for *The Australian*, personal communication, December 28, 2000.

28. *Bangkok Post, Business*, January 10, 2001, p. 2.

29. *Bangkok Post*, December 28, 2000, p. 3.

30. At a Thai Rak Thai election rally attended by the author in the country's impoverished northeast, Thaksin asked those who were farmers to raise their hands, to raise them again if they were indebted to banks and loan sharks, then raise them once more if they would benefit from three years of debt relief. Enthusiasm mounted among the 5,000–6,000 in attendance with each raising of hands. Thaksin claimed that he had solved his own debt problems, and would now help farmers in solving theirs. What other party, he inquired, had ever approached them in this way? Nakhon Ratchasima Province, January 3, 2001.

if Thaksin gained the prime ministership during the interim and the court found against him, he would be ordered to step down and barred from contesting political office for a further five years.

In these circumstances, much of the Bangkok-based media called for Thaksin to withdraw, arguing that the Thai economy could not withstand the uncertainty created by his occupying the prime ministership. Thaksin responded defiantly, belittling the corruption commission's findings and spurning the media, arguing that he was duty bound to remain as head of Thai Rak Thai and vie for the prime ministership. "My spirit is about holding on to my responsibility to the country," he intoned.³¹ However, he later revealed more personal motivations: "Making all [economic] problems go away is certainly graceful, and you will be remembered forever. Abandon the post and people will applaud for five minutes and forget you forever."³² A provincial *jao pho* who had been recruited to Thai Rak Thai, Piya Angkinand from Petchaburi, portrayed the commission's findings in more electorally upbeat and, indeed, analytically illuminating terms: "More people will vote for us because they feel sympathy for our leader, given the judgment. . . . The people have been watching TV and understand everything clearly."³³

While the reformist Democrats and the populist Thai Rak Thai continued to duel on the political foreground, a third aggregation—provincial businessmen, the *jao pho*, and some old-time machine politicians—continued to operate across the hinterland and even in some constituencies in Bangkok. Many of them remained apart from Thai Rak Thai, either because their notoriety was so great that they were unwanted or because they were determined to defend their local bailiwicks and dynasties. Examples included a former deputy interior minister, Chalerm Yubamrung, whose sons contested on the NAP ticket in the capital; the Asavahame family of the Rassadorn party in Samut Prakan Province; and the Chidchob family of Chart Thai in the northeastern province of Buri Ram. In waging their campaigns, these elements sometimes showed new sophistication in weaving their appeals for traditional loyalties with some studied rebuttals of Thai Rak Thai's policies.³⁴ And some of them tried also to project their images on the national scene, contesting through the party list system in order to qualify for ministerships. Indeed, their plotting

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31. *Bangkok Post*, December 28, 2000, p. 1.

32. *Ibid.*, January 4, 2001, p. 1.

33. *Ibid.*, December 28, 2000, p. 3.

34. At an election rally attended by the author in rural Buri Ram Province, Newin Chidchob, deputy agriculture minister and one of four Chidchob family candidates contesting for parliament on the Chart Thai slate, displayed great charisma and folk humor while energizing his audiences. But in acknowledging the local appeal of *Thai Rak Thai*'s populism, he also highlighted in a savvy way the fiscal irresponsibility of debt relief and rural credit schemes. Buri Ram Province, January 2, 2001.

to take their parties after the election into a ruling coalition that would doubtless be led by Thai Rak Thai revealed some easy synergies in policy content and style. Put simply, one could conceptualize the up-market and centralizing populism of Thai Rak Thai as paralleling on a higher plane the rough and fragmented clientelism found in the urban machines and poor provinces.³⁵

Election Outcomes

Though the Election Commission delayed its release of official results, owing to complaints of campaign violations against many winning candidates, the exit polling conducted by media organizations and observer groups quickly revealed that Thai Rak Thai had won easily. Indeed, while the party's victory had been expected, its margin proved so great that it claimed a majority of seats in its own right, the first party ever to do so in Thailand's political record. And, in making its majority more comfortable still, boosting its unofficial tally from 256 to beyond 300 in order to preempt any censure motions later, Thai Rak Thai contemplated taking on only one or perhaps two coalition partners rather than the customary half-dozen. Further, it proposed firm conditions, claiming all the economics ministries for itself while rebuffing parties that laced their entreaties with demands for portfolios. Hence, after the previous days of uncertainty about Thaksin's leadership that the NCCC's indictment had caused, the prospect of a strong government now gave a shot in the arm to local stock prices, especially in the banking and telecommunications sectors.

Meanwhile, the Democrat Party, in retaining the grudging support of Bangkok's middle class and its traditional constituencies in the south, won an unofficial total of 126 seats.³⁶ But with barely half the total of Thai Rak Thai, it readied itself to go into opposition. Further, the traditional provincial politicians and machine figures, especially those who had gambled on the party list, "lost en masse." In part, they fell victim to the new electoral reforms, having banned the singers, whiskey, and feasts that had traditionally been staples of campaign entertainment. Even more important, though, was the introduction of centralizing vote counting stations that greatly enhanced ballot secrecy.³⁷ Specifically, while local potentates attempted still to buy votes—albeit in stealthier ways given the new vigilance of the Election Commission—rural electorates, after taking the money, abandoned their local pa-

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35. *The Sunday Nation* thus characterized the rise of Thai Rak Thai in terms of "new money politics," January 7, 2001, p. 6. See also Ukrist Pathmanand, "The Thaksin Shinawatra Group: A Study of the Relationship between Money and Politics in Thailand," *Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 13 (1998) pp. 60–81.

36. *Bangkok Post*, January 8, 2001, p. 6.

37. *Ibid.*, January 10, 2001, p. 2.

trons for the grander populism of Thai Rak Thai.³⁸ In addition, the party list system, far from enabling small parties to extend their appeal, merely conveyed at the national level the anonymity of their candidates. Thus, the former Chart Thai prime minister, Banharn Silpa-Archa, often regarded as a “classic” provincial politician, expressed great disappointment over the results.³⁹ A leader of the Asavahame family’s Rassadorn party lamented, “I will wash my hands of politics. Our era is over.”⁴⁰ In sum, the Democrats, having risen to power in economic crisis, were now brought low by the crisis’s partial resolution. And many of the local potentates were weakened by electoral reforms and the greater populist appeal of Thai Rak Thai.

To be sure, despite the enhanced powers of the Electoral Commission, much vote-buying had taken place, cumulating finally in the customary “howling night” on the eve of the election.⁴¹ Doubts thus arose over the commission’s resolve, its five members often unable during the campaigning to reach the unanimity necessary for disqualifying errant candidates. Accordingly, though evidence was presented against many candidates by sundry poll monitoring groups, most notably PollWatch and P-Net (People’s Network for Elections in Thailand), the Election Commission—in evoking its sports metaphor—dared issue only a few of the “red cards” that disqualified candidates, preferring instead the milder yellow strain that while standing candidates down permitted them to run again in a subsequent round. Moreover, after the election had been held, vote-counting and reporting were marred by local protests and violence, apparently instigated by losing politicians and elements in the bureaucracy, the latter acting less to discredit the outcomes of particular races than to undermine the more fundamental process of democratization.⁴² One notes too that these events were played out against a customary backdrop of gunmen and bodyguards, bullet-proof vehicles, convoys, and safe houses. Indeed more than 40 canvassers were murdered, with Pasuk Pongpaichit advising that “the culture of violence has penetrated into the top ranks of the Thai political elite.” She notes also that amid the private sector’s continuing languor, “the competition to get access to government budgets is

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38. Samak Sundaravej, mayor of Bangkok and head of Prachakorn Thai, explained his party’s having lost all its lower-house seats to the “money politics” of Thai Rak Thai. “With that kind of money, you can buy the country.” Interview, Bangkok, January 17, 2001. See also Philip Bowring, “A Chance for the New Leader to Break with Thailand’s Past,” *International Herald Tribune* interactive, January 10, 2001.

39. As the results were released, Banharn exclaimed, “Every time I watch TV, I feel I’m going to faint.” *The Nation*, January 9, 2000, p. 6.

40. *Bangkok Post*, January 9, 2001, p. 8.

41. *Ibid.*, January 6, 2001, p. 1.

42. A prominent academic at Chulalongkorn University observed that bureaucrats were involved in the disturbances, “but we are not sure how high up it goes.” Discussion, Bangkok, January 12, 2001.

becoming more fierce.” And with a parallel increase in illegal activities, politicians became more able to sell protection to what she portrays as “gangster-businessmen.”⁴³

Nonetheless, the conduct of Thailand’s election in 2001 demonstrates that significant gains were made in terms of raising democratic quality. The ban on campaign entertainment injected a new note of seriousness into many campaign rallies. Further, though vote-buying appears not to have been reduced by the Election Commission’s power to disqualify candidates, it was rendered less salient by centralized counting. And after the election, the commission grew more responsive to the complaints that were lodged by poll-monitoring groups, thus ordering a new round of elections in 63 constituencies. Finally, violence among canvassers, though occurring at unacceptable levels, seemed to stem less directly from election campaigning than the shady business activities with which local politics often overlapped.

However, this evident increase in quality, made manifest in electoral reforms, did not yet prompt Thaksin to resort to the hypothesized destabilization of Thailand’s new democracy. Indeed, to the extent that the new reforms appeared to take hold, they redounded mostly to the benefit of Thai Rak Thai, negating the crude vote-buying strategies of the party’s local challengers, but leaving untouched its own systematic recruitment of parliamentary defectors before the election and its promise of populist pay-offs afterward. And hence, while the Election Commission finally annulled the victories of 32 Thai Rak Thai candidates, with five of them red-carded and hence prohibited from contesting again, most of the rest found that their party’s populist message still held, enabling them to win once more in a second electoral round, held at the end of January.⁴⁴ In these circumstances, Thai Rak Thai suffered a net setback of only eight seats that, while costing the party the slim parliamentary majority it appeared initially to have held, enabled it still to forge the three-member coalition that had originally been envisaged. Thus, after negotiations in early February, the party coalesced with the NAP and Chart Thai, gaining a total of 350 seats. And in early February, the Assembly duly selected Thaksin as prime minister.

Thai Democracy 2001: The Flight from Quality

One thus concludes that in terms of electoral reforms the quality of Thailand’s democracy was raised, but not so much that the ambitions of Thaksin and Thai Rak Thai were seriously checked. One must examine the electoral

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43. *The Nation*, December 30, 2000, p. 1.

44. For a breakdown of individual contests, see “Thailand’s General Election 2001, *Bangkok Post*, on the World Wide Web at <<http://www.bangkokpost.com/election2001/results.html>>.

process more broadly, then, to find a more stringent test of elite attitudes toward democratic quality. In particular, because the Election Commission finally endorsed Thaksin's rise to the prime ministership, he had no reason to counter it. But if the Constitutional Court tries later to remove him from the post, his conduct during the election campaigning gives reasons for thinking that he may in these circumstances react more aggressively. Indeed, Thaksin made plain during the campaign his disrespect for the new independent agencies and courts that have heightened democratic quality. For example, after the NCCC indicted him, he simply dismissed the agency and the horizontal accountability it imposed. Anticipating winning the prime ministership, he claimed, "I am still in. . . . I can legally hold a political post and perform duties because the inquiry process is not yet finished."⁴⁵ And when the NCCC's findings were later forwarded to the Constitutional Court, Thaksin predicted that the case would bog down in complexities, "so there should be no problem about me staying in office for years."⁴⁶ And if the court does eventually find against him, he suggested in a press interview that by that time his five-year ban on holding office would have expired. What is more, even if somehow forced from the prime ministership, Thaksin advised that "I would remain in charge of my party, pick someone to replace me, and I would support him."⁴⁷ So startling an incarnation as *eminence grise*, in going well beyond the executive abuses associated even with delegative democracy, would serve essentially to divert state power into Thaksin's own reserve domain, thus marking a sharp diminution of democratic quality.

But more than circumventing the Constitutional Court, stratagems have been canvassed by Thai Rak Thai that confront the institution head on. A high-level party official has warned that "soon, the normal courts will challenge the power of independent bodies set up under the Constitution."⁴⁸ Analysts have speculated also about Thai Rak Thai's drawing upon its great popular mandate and parliamentary numbers to amend the Constitution, perhaps abolishing the new institutions outright. As one indicator of Thai Rak Thai's readiness to make swift and substantial changes in law, one notes that shortly after the election and well before results had been made official party leaders proposed undoing many of the financial reform measures passed by the Democrat-led government, loosening banking regulations that had been raised to international standards and channeling state assistance to favored sectors.⁴⁹ Indeed, Thaksin came to refer to himself as "Thailand's chief ex-

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45. *Bangkok Post*, December 27, 2000, p. 1.

46. *The Nation*, January 13, 2001, p. 1.

47. Thomas Crampton and David Ignatius, "Thai Victor Says He Would Obey Court Ruling," *International Herald Tribune* interactive, January 11, 2001.

48. Quoted in *Far Eastern Economic Review (FEER)*, January 11, 2000, p. 22.

49. *The Nation*, January 9, 2001, p. 1.

ecutive officer," equipped with a "war room" through which to pursue his new policy directions.⁵⁰ In a press interview, he took on an even more forceful guise as a "Genghis Khan type of manager."⁵¹

This analysis argues, however, that if ascendant elite factions are unable to roll back democratic quality, they will respond in ways that test stability. It attributes this outcome to the transition by replacement, a regime change through which reforms are advanced to the extent that they challenge entrenched interests, finally provoking an authoritarian backlash. What follows are some brief speculations about the ways in which this might occur in Thailand's politics today, accompanied by scouring for early indicators.

Paradoxically, Thaksin himself can be construed as having acted to raise democratic quality, though of a kind that is in tension with other kinds of quality as well as with the requisites for stability. More specifically, by the reckoning of those who find consolidation in social egalitarianism, Thaksin's policies must be assessed as more favorable than those of the Democrats, paralyzed while in office by their fears that social welfare yields little but inefficiencies and corruption. But as has been shown, in trying to secure the prime ministership in order to advance his populist aims, Thaksin may run afoul of the agencies and courts that promote horizontal accountability. What is more, his populism may threaten other elites, finally setting the conditions in which democracy may be destabilized.

This process may derive from budgetary constraints faced by Thaksin's populist policies, fracturing his cross-class coalition over time. Estimates produced by Standard Chartered Bank indicate that Thai Rak Thai's spending programs, if fully carried out, would raise public debt to an unsustainable 100% of the country's GDP.⁵² Thus, in their haste to gain access to their respective programs, business elites and farmworkers may clash over limited resources, prompting Thaksin to rein in one side or the other. Indeed, just days after the election, some major corporate debtors, characterized in the local press as "delighted" by the prospect of a new asset management company, suspended negotiations with their banks over loan restructuring.⁵³ On the other side, farmers began to refuse payments on their loan installments to the BAAC, leaving the institution "seriously affected."⁵⁴ The United Front of Northern Farmers went further, calling the proposed moratorium insufficient and demanding debt write-offs, then threatening to rally farmers throughout the north "to show their force."⁵⁵ In this situation, the BAAC's

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50. Ibid. (Business and Finance section), January 8, 2001, p. B1.

51. Ibid., p. 1.

52. Ibid., January 9, 2001, pp. B1-B4.

53. Ibid.

54. Ibid., January 10, 2001.

55. Ibid. interactive, January 25, 2001.

branch managers were instructed in some districts to inform borrowers that “it was not yet certain” that the debt relief program would be implemented. Similarly, many farmworkers and urban poor, believing that Thai Rak Thai’s health scheme had come into effect immediately upon the party’s victory, began approaching hospitals to demand subsidized treatment. Besieged hospital officials thus implored Thai Rak Thai to explain more fully the time tabling for its scheme. Party officials complied, stating that the budget for 2001 was already in place and next year’s already drafted, thus preventing the subsidies from being introduced until 2003.⁵⁶

Accordingly, one gets a sense of which way Thai Rak Thai will tip when its cross-class coalition comes under strain. And with the party having raised democratic quality in terms of egalitarian social policies, it must itself perhaps administer the authoritarian backlash, defending the interests of Bangkok-based business elites over those of the farmworkers and urban poor. Moreover, because this probably would involve new restrictions on civil liberties rather than mere curbs on horizontal accountability, the flight from democratic quality would threaten stability, shifting the regime into the distinct though lesser category of semi- or pseudo-democracy. As has been shown, one finds in this configuration the marked diminution of civil liberties, in particular, freedoms of communication and assembly. And elections, though regularly held, are proportionately distorted.

Hence, as tensions appear in Thai Rak Thai’s cross-class coalition, the party’s populist policies or its attempts to retreat from those policies, sharply betraying its new farmworker followings, may attract strong criticisms from the media. In these circumstances, it is easy to imagine a Thai Rak Thai-led government curbing press freedoms, a course that during the recent campaigning Thaksin showed a willingness to undertake. When a popular new media outlet, iTV, attempted to air reports that were critical of his party, Thaksin’s Shin Corporation, a major shareholder, issued “telephone orders” to the editorial staff banning the broadcasts⁵⁷—an action reminiscent of the so-called telephone culture in Suharto’s Indonesia. Shin Corporation also overruled the station’s planned coverage of a Democrat Party campaign rally, while managerial pressure forced several staff members to resign. In this way, Thaksin clearly violated Article 41 of the new Constitution, which guarantees the editorial independence of media organizations from state agencies and owners. And hence, as political tensions and press criticisms intensify during his prime ministerial tenure, whatever its duration, Thaksin may react by legislating tighter guidelines for “responsible” reporting.

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56. *Bangkok Post*, January 10, 2001, p. 3.

57. *The Nation*, January 4, 2001, pp. 1–2.

At the same time, one can anticipate the intensification of Thailand's recent record of farmworker organizing and militancy. Recall that under the Democrats, who undertook little but market liberalization, farmers grew increasingly confrontational. But with their expectations dramatically raised by Thai Rak Thai, perhaps only to be dashed, confrontation may burst into widespread rural violence. Of course, irrespective of social upheavals, it is unlikely that the military in its current temper would try directly to take power. But the government could well call upon the security forces to contain the non-government organizations and social movements that are associated with farmers, thus sharply curbing freedoms of assembly. To be sure, Thaksin has so far given no clues of his willingness to react to the demands of farmers in these ways. But during the recent election campaign, when one of his canvassers was shot in the northern province of Phrae, Thaksin declared that if he won the prime ministership, he would "take over the National Police and stamp out all political influence—starting with Phrae."⁵⁸ His rapport with the police force in which he once was a lieutenant-colonel, inspiring his campaign plea that police officers support "one of their own," makes Thaksin's canvassing the use of coercion quite credible.

Finally, in delivering any authoritarian backlash, Thaksin could draw from a deep and congenial wellspring of elite-level sentiments. Indeed, in seeking to uncover democracy's enemies in Thailand, one can readily identify some conservative, even royalist elements who, in the name of decisional efficiencies, social harmony, cultural appropriateness, or resistance to globalization call today for a "democratic" or "constitutional pause."⁵⁹ As their model, they look nostalgically upon the semi-democracy that Thailand operated under General Prem Tinsulanond during the 1980s.⁶⁰ These elements consist of mid-ranking officers in the military, less able than top generals to perpetuate their prerogatives; officials in the Interior Ministry and the police who resent the new independent agencies and courts; and sundry ex-senators, constitutional lawyers, and talk-show hosts.⁶¹ Their policy aims may not square with Thaksin's. But they may nonetheless collaborate with him in any regime closure he undertakes in order to restore their own privileges. Alternatively, they may keep their distance, quietly awaiting, perhaps even inciting, the tensions in Thai Rak Thai's unfundable populism and cross-class coalition. Either way, in a context of greater democratic quality, critical weight is lent to destabilizing pressures.

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58. Ibid., January 4, 2001, p. 6.

59. Surichai Wun'gao, Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, personal communication, January 13, 2001.

60. Shawn Crispin, Bangkok correspondent for *FEER*, personal communication, January 11, 2001.

61. See *FEER*, November 2, 2000, pp. 30, 34.

Conclusions

In evaluating the twin dimensions of democratic consolidation, this analysis has argued that in the contemporary setting of Thai politics a high-quality democracy is unstable and a stable democracy must be low quality. Hence, if elites are unsuccessful in significantly rolling back democratic reforms, they may shift to another, more fundamental dimension, thus testing democratic persistence. More specifically, with Thaksin Shinawatra, Thailand's new prime minister, having in some ways increased democratic quality through his egalitarian pledges, the contradictions in his cross-class coalition, inflamed by budgetary constraints, may force him to recoil in ways that destabilize democracy. In brief, by withdrawing his populist offerings, certainly to farmworkers, but perhaps also to business elites, he will have so antagonized his followings that he must respond by curbing civil liberties of communication and assembly. Here, one finds a great irony. Though the expectations discussed above about the consequences of transition by replacement will in this way have been fulfilled, the same national leader who raised democratic quality will have delivered the blow to stability, an unanticipated conflation of roles.

In this situation, even if regular elections continue to be held, the abrogation of civil liberties marks the advent of a different regime type, namely, semi-democracy. Such change would signal clearly that Thailand's democracy had been undermined, finally closing the causal sequence outlined here. There are empirical precedents in Thaksin's recent performance and Thailand's longer political record for this kind of outcome. There are also some theoretical grounds, derived largely from a process of transition by replacement that began nearly a decade ago. Hence, the assessment made by Suchit Bunbongkarn shortly before the 2001 election still stands: "conditions for consolidation have not yet been met in Thailand."⁶²

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62. Suchit Bunbongkarn, "Thailand's Successful Reforms," *Journal of Democracy* 10:4 (October 1999), p. 67.