

The New Southeast Asia

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An extraordinary international change occurred in the 1980s and 1990s: the transformation of the dominant bipolar world of Communists and non-Communists to a more Fragmented and interdependent world of competing, multipolar centers of power, with the United States participating more as an equal than as superpower and the Soviet Union losing its vast empire. The democratization of previously authoritarian political systems, and the fading of ideological distinctions will have an impact on virtually all of the world's nations, including those in Southeast Asia. Perhaps of most importance, economic relations have replaced security concerns as the most important issue of contemporary international relations.

In just one decade, the Communist powers of the Soviet Union, China, and Vietnam, ceased being security threats to Southeast Asia. The advent of perestroika and glasnost has foreclosed the possibility that the Soviet Union would attempt a military move into Southeast Asia. Symbolic of the decline of Soviet interest in militarily influencing Southeast Asia is the absence of use of Cam Ranh and Da Nang bases in Vietnam.

Soviet withdrawal is a sign that Soviet Threats to the Waterways of the Pacific Ocean, South China Sea, and Indian Ocean, are not imminent and that Southeast Asia is not a target of expansionism, either from the Soviet Union itself or from its client state Vietnam.

Vietnam's withdrawal of troops from Cambodia in 1989, its policy of economic liberalization and renovation (doi moi), and its precarious economic status preclude military intervention into another region of Southeast Asia. Having achieved normalization of relations with the United States and having ended the economic embargo, Vietnam has even become a member of ASEAN.

China, as well, is fully engaged in its own attempts to strengthen its economy by improving trade relations with the world's capitalist countries including ASEAN. In short, ASEAN state sovereignty been reduced, although most ASEAN leaders believe a U.S. presence in the area is still warranted. The reduced presence of the major powers has allowed the Southeast Asian nations to share defense burdens more than in the past. A 'new nationalism' in foreign policy, characterized by reduced dependence on the major powers, became the theme of

both the Communist and non-Communist governments in southeast Asia. This world's nations, irrespective of ideology, and international interdependence in economic matters such as trade.

Coinciding with the remarkable changes in the international sphere have been indigenous developments throughout the region that make the southeast Asian nations fundamentally different from only a decade ago. The clearest illustrations of these changes have occurred in the three Indochinese nations of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, where socialist economics has been deemed a failure, to be replaced by market-oriented economies more similar to those in ASEAN. Ten years of economic decline has led to similar policies of renovation that, to a greater or lesser extent in the three countries, ended collectivization, promoted decentralized planning, downgraded agricultural cooperatives, and terminated price controls and subsidies to inefficient industries. foreign capital has been solicited by means of liberalized foreign-investment laws, and trade relations with ASEAN and Western capitalist nations have been promoted.

These significant changes bore fruit in the late 1980s. In Vietnam, for example, farm production rose so that food self-sufficiency was achieved in 1989. Vietnam became the third largest exporter of rice in the world, a major achievement because, in the preceding decade, Vietnam had been forced to import food. Laos experienced similar economic growth, after promulgating in 1986 the 'new thinking' (*chin tanakan may*) reforms.

Changes in non-communist Southeast Asia have been of a different sort, but no less important, than those in the Indochinese States. The ASEAN nations have moved from somnolent, primarily agricultural economies to vibrant, manufacturing-oriented economies with higher economic growth rates than states in any other region of the world. The phenomenal growth rates as high as 10 percent per year in the late 1980s have fundamentally changed the ASEAN landscape. Per capita income has more than tripled in just one decade. (the Philippines is an exception due to economic mismanagement during the Marcos presidency.)

Although more difficult to specify, internal political changes in Southeast Asia are as important as domestic economic changes. Throughout the region there has been a tenuous, sometimes faltering trend toward pluralistic polities with stronger political institutions and less reliance on personalism. In Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, for example, there is more openness in conversations and in the media regarding political issues. In Vietnam's local-level elections candidates have been allowed to

campaign with competing platforms. Although the Communist party retains its Preeminent position, debates have taken place in the national assemblies of all three nations. Struggles between " conservatives " and " reformers " have led to changes in party doctrine and governmental policies. Prior to 1986, such conflict and open discussion were not allowed.

Despite these changes, there is little semblance of democracy in any of the three Indochinese countries. Opposition groups are not allowed. Democracy is difficult even under the best of circumstances, but especially difficult in nations whose culture and traditions are antithetical to democratic practices. All three nations have been further disadvantaged by severe war damage and devastated economies. Cambodia especially continues to reel from the horrific Pol Pot regime which ruled from 1975 to 1979 when one-fourth of the population was lost from executions and famine or from fleeing the genocidal leaders.

The ASEAN nations continued their slow evolution toward pluralism, stronger institutions, and civil liberties. In Thailand, for example, the government has been transformed from a military controlled bureaucratic polity to a semi-democracy with a widening of the political base and the growth of new interest groups. The shift has been from personalized, clientelist politics to more institutionalized and regularized politics with the military playing a subordinate rather than primary role.

Indonesia's president Suharto has opted for a different balance, continuing the military's dominant role, while allowing the formal structures of democracy.



Suharto has been reelected to the presidency on five occasions and has established various elected advisory bodies. The Philippines, on the other hand, has moved from the authoritarian regime of Ferdinand Marcos to the

formally democratic administration of Corazon Aquino and then, through free elections, to Fidel Ramos. Nevertheless, the system is still dominated by dynastic oligarchies, making the notion of democracy highly problematical in any real sense.

In Malaysia, pluralist politics are integral to the way authoritative decisions have been made. Through a system of separation of powers, free and competitive elections, and wide-ranging civil liberties, the Malaysian government has been accountable to the citizenry. However, because of the ethnic communal tensions that pervade Malaysian society, the populace has accepted certain controls on its freedom, designed to assure continued stability and consensus.

Singapore, Southeast Asia's most efficiently run government, has been led by the brilliant Lee Kuan Yew, who stepped down in November 1990 from his position



as Prime minister (while retaining his position as head of the People's Action Party). Within a structure of democratic institutions that features free elections and a parliamentary system, Singapore has been run as a one-party system that centers around Lee and now his successor Goh Chok Tong. By circumscribing the freedoms of the opposition and by achieving remarkable economic growth, the government has obtained the support of the overwhelming majority of the people.

There is no democracy in Negara Brunei Darussalam. Its political system is an absolute monarchy, with no representative form of government. The 1984 constitution consolidated the power of the monarchy by suspending parliamentary institutions. All aspects of Bruneian society are controlled by the Sultan.

These themes are dealt with in more detail for Vietnam and Thailand.

Vietnam

Expectations by the Vietnamese that independence from foreign exploitation would bring them a better life were dashed by the continued deterioration of the economy. In the 1980s, a decade after their defeat of the United States, the Vietnamese people's standard of living was worse than before the war. Realizing the seriousness of the economic malaise, the sixth congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) met in December 1986 to implement a plan of renovation (*doi moi*) to remedy the problems. Renovation called for major economic and political changes, with the proviso that the party-led dictatorship of the proletariat remain sacrosanct. Conservative CPV party leaders feared that the dominance of the party would be lost, and military leaders believed that renovation threatened national security because it diminished the importance of military strength in favor of economic development.

Renovation was criticized when the new policies failed to improve the economy. In 1988, for example, famine was barely averted in the northern provinces, and inflation increased to almost 1,000 percent. Renovation was also threatened by the changes in Eastern Europe, as country after country brought down their Communist rulers. Of most concern to the CPV leaders was the fall of Romania's leader, who, most believed, was invincible. The people's revolt in Burma against the military also worried Vietnamese leaders, because there were many parallels in the two countries' bleak economic conditions. These international changes, ironically, strengthened the position of the hard-liners. Vietnam was one of the world's few nations which condemned Poland's change of government and praised China's crushing of its democracy movement. President Nguyen Van Linh stated that the party rejected calls for "bourgeois liberalization, pluralism, and multi-opposition parties aimed at denying Marxism-Leninism, socialism and the party's leadership".

Vietnam's economy was jolted by the sudden end to the cold war when 180,000 Vietnamese left East-bloc nations, no longer wanted as cheap laborers, and reentering a country with a massive unemployment problem of 20 percent. Moreover, the new international order has resulted in the end to large amounts of aid from the Soviet Union. In the past five years, the Soviets provided some \$16 billion to Vietnam. Sixty percent of Vietnamese aid has been with the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, a percentage that will be reduced as these nations turn their sights toward the West.

Also jeopardizing renovation was the reformers' decision to disengage from Cambodia, withdrawing troops

by September 1989. The conservatives argued that Vietnam received no visible benefit, not even expressions of gratitude, let alone offers from the United States to move toward normalizing diplomatic relations and ending the trade embargo put into effect by the United States during the war. The setback caused the reformers to be more orthodox and to take fewer risks. The return of tens of thousands of former soldiers from Cambodia has crowded the labor force as well.

The new international era a positive effect on Vietnam's economy by undermining the rationale for the U.S. imposed economic embargo. As anti-communism became less salient as a determinant of foreign policy, more and more nations developed economic ties with Vietnam. Vietnam has expanded trade with Britain, Australia, South Korea, and even Japan. Japanese Companies have moved quietly to establish corporations and develop a foothold.

When the United States began to invest in Vietnam, many predicted that Vietnam would grow rapidly. However, a plateau was reached in the mid-1990s because of the pervasive corruption, the highly centralized and inefficient bureaucracy, the weakness of the nation's infrastructure including communications and road, the rise of AIDS as an epidemic, the continued high birth rates which preclude rapid economic growth, and the rising gap between the urban rich and the rural poor.

From the Vietnamese perspective, Western democracy represents all that the country's leaders have rejected: unstable regimes, led by bourgeois leaders for their own interests and against the interests of the masses. The Vietnamese also reject the "arrogance" of the Western world (and now the Eastern European nations as well), which criticizes the Vietnamese government. The "counter-revolutionary forces" in Poland were condemned by the Vietnamese when the Communist leadership there was removed. Indeed, Vietnamese leaders have stated that Vietnam is not prepared for democracy, that conditions in the country are not appropriate for democracy. In this period of restoration and economic travail after a destructive war, according to Linh, the "strong leadership" of the party is necessary to assure the nation's stability and progress.

Foreign Minister Thach, in a speech in the United States in October 1990 commented that "From China and the Tiananmen incident, we learned that you cannot have economic reform without political reform. From the troubles we see in Eastern Europe, we learned that you cannot have political reform without economic reform. These reforms must go together." He added that after

40 years we have come to realize that government cannot be simply of and for the state. At the end of 1990, Thach's view was not one adopted by the CPV politburo.

In the economic domain, democratization is no such a pejorative term. Decentralization and accountability are accepted as necessary for an effective economy. Economic principles of the market and competition, once viewed as decadent bourgeois concepts, have become the centerpieces of renovation. Vietnamese leadership argue that the long years of war have limited the growth of bureaucratic corruption. Moreover, while Communism was imposed on Eastern Europe by Soviet arms, it is indigenous in Vietnam, where the CPV was the primary nationalist force against the French and Americans. CPV supporters note that the nation's leadership does not live corruptly as did Ceausescu of Romania and Honecker of Germany. CPV leaders live simply, with few perks.

Vietnam has no history of democracy. Its traditions are Confucianist, stressing hierarchy and order, and more recently Communist, emphasizing the unquestioned supremacy of the party. There have been few popular demonstrations for democratic rights, and the Vietnam war was never a struggle for civil liberties and representative government. The movement of European Communist governments toward democracy has not impelled the Vietnamese leadership or people to a similar transformation of their government.

Vietnamese authorities have been shaken by the demise of Communist governments and the rise of democratic institutions throughout the world. While arguing that the experience in Eastern Europe is not relevant to Vietnam and that the Communist Party of Vietnam will continue to rule unilaterally, the government has had to alter its disastrous domestic economic policies in the direction of a market economy. The recent moves by Vietnam to convince the United States to end the trade and aid embargo and to normalize diplomatic relations also result from the reduction of support for Vietnam from the Soviet Union and from the realization that Western technology and investment is necessary for economic development.

The Vietnamese authorities are embarrassed that Vietnam's standard of living is one of the lowest in all of Asia despite an abundance of natural resources and a disciplined labor force. *Doi Moi*, a reform program that preceded the Soviet Union's perestroika, reflects the view that socialism cannot solve the nation's economic problems. However, regarding political issues, the new international era has had a negative impact. Global democratization has caused the Vietnamese authorities

to dig in rather than to reform. In the long run that decision will undo the *Doi Moi* reforms by suppressing the spirit and loyalty of the Vietnamese toward their government and their common future.

In 1997, Vietnam is confronted with a severe dilemma: an open economy and a closed polity. As new leaders take over, inevitably Vietnam will open its polity of face being isolated from the global system that is now responsible for the nation's growth. Vietnam will not tolerate becoming another Burma, separate from the world and bringing its people great poverty.

Contemporary Thai Politics

The clearest sign of change in contemporary Thai politics was the rise to power of Chatichai Choonhavan in 1988, the first elected member of parliament to become prime minister since 1976. Chatichai assumed his premiership following the 1988 elections, when the political party he led received the largest plurality of votes and Prem refused to accept another term as prime minister. Prem, who had led Thailand during a period of economic growth, had been deemed acceptable to civilian and military forces alike and had been expected to continue in office. His refusal to be a candidate opened the way for civilian leadership under Chatichai.

The smooth transition reflected the new optimism about Thailand's evolution toward democracy. Chatichai had assumed power without relying on the support of the army. Also the constitutional provisions for elections worked well in transferring political power. Thus the military coup d'état in February 1991 was a shocking assault on the notion that Thailand had successfully institutionalized democratic and civilian government.

The fact that there was no successful coup d'état after 1977 lulled the Chatichai administration into believing that the days of coups were over. Also, the fact that communist insurgency, which plagued Thailand in the 1960s and 1970s, was quelled and that there was no external threat to Thai security was thought to have undermined the major rationale for military intervention into governmental affairs. The strengthened role of political parties and the parliament, as well as a general attitudinal change more favorable to democratic civilian rule, especially among the politically aware, also were said to have reduced the military's influence. The king's determination to oppose a military coup was thought to lessen the chance that such a coup would succeed. Moreover, the remarkable economic growth of 11 percent per year (highest in the world for three years) was thought to provide a bulwark against intervention by the military.

Military leaders had a stake in the status quo because they benefited from the enormous profits that came from the rapid transformation of the Thai economy. Finally, the Thai military was thought to accept Chatichai, himself a former army general, because of the generous budgetary allotments he provided to it.

Counter to this analysis, on February 23, 1991, Supreme Commander Sundhara Kongsompong and Army Commander-in-Chief Suchinda Kraprayoon abrogated the constitution, dismissed the elected government, and set up a temporary National Peace Keeping Council (NPKC),



with powers of martial law, and themselves as the ultimate arbiters of public policy. This momentous decision was made just two hours before Prime Minister Chatichai was arrested on an airplane waiting to take off for Chiang Mai where the King had granted him an audience. Initially, the citizenry greeted the coup with acquiescence, though not with enthusiasm, and there were no public protests or demonstrations.

Despite Chatichai's widespread support, several issues raised concern about the government's stability and effectiveness. Democratization had not ended the personalism and factionalism that have long been a part of Thai politics. Even among the coalition partners, factional infighting remained the norm as party leaders vied for the most influential cabinet positions. Because he was seventy in 1990, Chatichai stated on several occasions that he was 'too old' to remain in his position of leadership for long. The uncertainty of his tenure exacerbated factional maneuvering and set the scene for the February 1991 coup.

Related to this problem of personalism, corruption continued to be an important part of the political scene. The phenomenal economic growth of the 1980s brought

large amounts of capital into the financial system, and these new resources were the target of public officials for private gain. Thai citizens were skeptical about the administration's professed concern for the majority, which has not gained from the economy's high growth rates.

Many Thais viewed the administration as primarily concerned with big business interests. Indeed, the military claimed that the primary reason for the 1991 coup was the pervasive corruption of the kingdom's politicians. Thai newspapers, unencumbered by censorship, reported daily on the rampant corruption among top level cabinet members. Huge telecommunication projects, massive road and elevated commuter railway ventures, cable television contracts and new oil refineries are examples of multibillion dollar deals, arranged and managed (or mismanaged) by politicians whose main aim was to perpetuate their power base and personal wealth.

Although this substantial corruption was an important legitimizing rationale for the coup, the more direct cause was a pattern of slights carried out by Chatchai and perceived by the military as threats to its traditional prerogatives.

The coup temporarily ended Thailand's steady progress toward democratization and embarrassed the nation in its expanding international affairs. However, the conventional wisdom that coups were pass was not completely wrong. Realizing that times had indeed changed, the NPKC moved quickly to establish an interim constitution and to name Anand Panyarachun, a distinguished civilian, as prime minister. His appointment was a sign that the military believed the populace would not long tolerate direct military rule. Since 1973, Thai rulers have been more acutely aware of "their mutual dependence and of a long standing social contract between the nation's patrons and their clients." Anand's appointment, announced on March 2, was universally praised, reflecting his impeccable status and reputation as a diplomat, administrator, and businessman. Prime Minister Anand, in turn, appointed an interim cabinet consisting of outstanding technocrats, notable scholars, and senior military officials in the defense and interior ministries.

The coup leaders emphasized their commitment to policy continuity in economic matters, calling in leading Thai bankers and business executives to assure them that Thailand's market and export-oriented economy would remain intact. Political parties were retained and a national legislative assembly was established to approve a constitution and arrange for an election. For the overwhelming majority of Thais, the coup changed

nothing except the names of the kingdom's top government leaders.

The appointment of Anand assured that an independent-minded diplomat would lead Thailand during the interim period, before elections could be scheduled on March 22, 1992. The junta gave Anand wide leeway in running the government. On the other hand, they asserted their views forcefully regarding the new constitution promulgated by the interim notional legislative assembly, appointed by the NPKC. The final document returned the kingdom to former days, when the appointed upper house was given equal power with the elected lower house regarding policy making. Moreover, the chairman of the NPKC was given provisional power to nominate the new prime minister, thereby providing effective power over the government for the length of the next government's term.

In the face of public protests, General Suchinda announced that neither he nor other NPKC leaders would become prime minister after the elections. That statement strengthened the view that the military leaders has been hurt by further adverse criticism of their role following the coup. The ostensible causes of the coup,



such as widespread vote buying, had continued unabated, especially among parties supporting the NPKC undermining the military's rationalization for taking over the government. The debate over the constitution brought the formerly acquiescent intelligentsia and media figures into confrontation with the NPKC leaders. When Prime Minister Anand publicly criticized the draft of the constitution, the floodgates of criticism opened, forcing more democratic provisions. The military's attempt to dictate a constitution written in blatantly self-interested terms, was thwarted by public opposition that threatened to spread out of control.

Anand's independence from the military was unprecedented for a civilian who had been placed in power by a military coup. Indeed, Anand's "aberrant"

confidence went so far as to block the military's request to buy additional weaponry and his administration turned out to be one of the most effective in modern Thai politics. From March 1 to December 6, 1991, the government passed 127 new laws, compared to 105 for the thirty months of the preceding Chatichai government. From December to the end of his term, Anand's legislative record was just as great. His administration set forth measures suppression privatization, trade liberalization, deregulation of onerous restrictions over the economy, tax reform focusing on a value added tax (VAT) of seven percent, labor constraints including the abolition of state enterprise unions, and infrastructure projects.

Once the new constitution was approved and an election law passed, campaigning began in earnest. The major theme of newspaper articles was vote-and candidate-buying by parties looking for candidates to run under their banner. Despite the establishment by Anand of a "Watchdog committee" to monitor campaigning, many parties distributed money aimed at enlisting electable candidates so that the party could become the core of the next coalition government. For months before the election, an unseemly move among candidates toward wealthy parties occurred, with no concern whatsoever for the stance of the party on issues or ideological direction. For the majority of candidates, the only principle concerned which party made the best money offer.

Political parties sold their names and vote-mobilizing organizations to candidates. In return, candidates received up to several hundred thousand dollars each for campaign purposes, but these funds were often given in cash, and could not be accounted for. The practice of party-jumping arose from the fact that parties rarely set forth coherent policy statements and were used largely to support particular candidates.

The elections were carried out with bureaucratic efficiency, although the campaign included election law violations. Pollwatch volunteers monitored campaign expenses of individual candidates who were limited to \$40,000. Vote-buying included the following kinds of tactics: giving cash to voters in return for promises of support, offering food and alcoholic drinks free to people, serving free food at village festivals, and promising cash to voters if the candidate the person was told to vote for won. To discourage vote-buying in the 1992 election, radio, television, newspapers, and banners featured slogans designed to discourage people from 'selling their freedom.'

There is conflicting evidence regarding vote-buying as an effective means to garner votes. Most

researchers have found that money is a primary incentive for determining a citizen's vote. Candidates must have an effective network of support, run by canvassers (*hua khanaen*) who have close ties with village leaders such as headmen, teachers, and respected elders. Because candidates need to assure that the money they hand out will not be wasted, they distribute it through a network of canvassers. Voters tend to vote for those candidates close to village or town leaders who have helped the voter out in the past. If these leaders have funds to divvy out from candidates, villagers are all the most likely to support the choice of the leaders.

On the other hand, the government's anti vote-buying campaign suggested to voters that they should not accept money from candidates, but if they did they should then vote for that candidate's opponent. This more cynical response resulted in voters sometimes accepting favors from many candidates. Although vote-buying occurred throughout the kingdom, poll watchers found few cases of outright fraud such as ballot-box stuffing.

To assure that the military continued its dominance, military-backed parties, who were close to General Suchinda, formed a joint campaign scheme to minimize competition and to elect candidates supporting the NPKC. The parties included the Samakkhi Tham, under the leadership of Narong Wongwan, the Chat Thai party led by retired Air Chief Marshal Somboon Rahong, and the conservative Social Action Party, with Montri Pongpanit as leader. All three party leaders agreed they would consider a non-elected premier and might well integrate into leadership positions even those politicians who had been charged with being 'unusually wealthy', a euphemism for corrupt, by the anti-corruption investigative group appointed by the NPKC. It is ironic that the Chat Thai party was included in the group since that was Prime Minister Chatichai's party when he was overthrown by the very coup leaders his party later supported. Those who staged the coup joined with those whom they accused of being unworthy of holding public office, to form a new government.

Opposition parties were viewed as those who opposed the continuation of military dominance and who pledged to support amendments to make the constitution more democratic. In another irony, the leading opposition New Aspiration Party was led by former Army General Chawalit Youngchaiyut, the mentor of coup leader governor Chamlong Srimuang, gave up his position to lead the Phalang Dharma Party. Buoyed by Chamlong's reputation as an incorruptible ascetic,

Phalang Dharma swept all but three of Bangkok's 35 seats. The third major opposition group was the Democrats, Thailand's longest-lived political party, whose candidates campaigned against the NPKC leadership and in favor of a return to democratic rule.

The March 22 elections resulted in a narrow victory for parties aligned with the NPKC. The pro-military Samakkhi Tham Party won 79 of 360 seats, Chat Thai 74, New Aspiration Party 72, Democrats 44, Phalang Dharma 43, Social Action Party 31, Prachakorn Thai 7, Solidarity 6, and Ratsadorn 4. The Samakkhi Tham, Chat Thai, Social Action Party and two minor parties forged a coalition of 195 seats or 55 percent of the total. The other major parties (New Aspiration, Democrats, Phalang Dharma, and Solidarity) formed the opposition.

The pro-military coalition initially nominated Narong Wongwan as the next prime minister. His credentials as a civilian four-term elected member of parliament, a former Cabinet member, and leader of the political party winning the largest plurality made him an attractive choice for the NPKC leaders. As a billionaire businessman, his considerable fortune helped build the Samakkhi Tham party in less than one year. His leadership would mean that the military could dominate political policy making. However, on the day he was nominated, the United States State Department confirmed that Narong had been denied a visa in July 1991 because he was alleged to be involved in drug trafficking from his business base in the Golden Triangle area of Northern Thailand. Narong had made a fortune in a wide variety of businesses: tobacco, transportation, mining, timber, and holiday resorts. He had also been investigated for possessing "unusual wealth" when a member of the Chatichai cabinet, but those charges were later dropped.

With Narong's reputation besmirched, military leaders began to distance themselves from him while political party leaders spent the following week attempting to forge a coalition agreement for prime minister. Newspaper stories speculated that the military, long knowing about Narong's involvement in drug trafficking, had deliberately recommended him for prime minister as a ploy to create a crisis of leadership which the military would resolve through the nomination of General Suchinda, the 1991 coup leader. Indeed, Narong backed out from the nomination, and the coalition named Suchinda despite his unequivocal declaration that he would not accept the premiership. His nomination was approved by the king and the parliament with the concurrence of the speaker of the parliament as well as General Sundhara, the chief of the NPKC. In what Thais

referred to as "the second coup" or "the silent coup", General Suchinda, by engineering military control over the position of prime minister, reversed the steps Thailand had taken toward democratic government. To express their dismay, some 50,000 protestors announced the Suchinda's appointment.

Prime Minister Suchinda announced a controversial cabinet, including eleven members who had been investigated by an anti-graft panel (established by Suchinda after the February 1991 coup) to see if they had enriched themselves while in office. Three of the eleven were declared "unusually wealthy", but were nevertheless selected for the new cabinet. Critics of Suchinda pointed out that their appointment gave lie to the original claim of the coup leaders that their purpose in overthrowing the Chatichai administration was to curtail corruption.

To assure continued support, Suchinda appointed the leaders of each of the coalition parties to major posts. Narong Wongwan (Samakkhi Tham), Somborn Rabong (Chat Thai), and Samak Sundaravej (Prachakorn Thai) were all appointed deputy prime ministers. Montri Pongpanit, transport and communications minister in the Chatichai administration and a politician found to be "unusually wealthy", returned as deputy prime minister. Suchinda retained the defense portfolio and the important interior slot was given to Suchinda's close friend Air chief Marshall Anan Kulintha. Critics noted that the number of technocrats were considerably fewer than in Anand's cabinet. Ten of the forty-five ministers were non-members of the parliament; sixteen represented the Samakkhi Tham Party, sixteen the Chat Thai, two the Prachakorn Thai, and one the Ratsadorn.

Suchinda's tenure as prime minister had parallels with that of General Prem who ruled Thailand from 1980 to 1988. Both leaders were generals who refused to be MP candidates and who followed a difficult era of hectic civilian rule. However, Prem had solid support from a majority coalition in parliament, the army, and the citizenry whereas Suchinda led a divided coalition, and was viewed as the person who ended democratic (however inept) rule. In Bangkok, the Phalang Dharma sweep and the strong showing of the Democrats in the southern provinces in the March 1992 elections demonstrated the high degree of opposition to a return to military rule. The fact that many members of the majority coalition were precisely the politicians of the majority coalition were precisely the politicians deemed corrupt by Suchinda and ousted in the 1991 coup augured poorly for the stability of his administration.

Somboon and instead, approved the return of Anand Panyarachun as Prime Minister. The King's decision occurred just before the parliament overwhelmingly passed constitutional amendments requiring prime ministers to be elected members of parliament, and reducing the role of the military-dominated Senate. The first amendment was designed to apply to prime ministers named before the amendments were promulgated, so that Anand could rule.

Anand's appointment was met enthusiastically by most Thais who recalled he had won international praise for running an honest and efficient government during the interim period following the 1991 coup. His appointment was seen as a brilliant stroke to end the stalemate following the catastrophic events of May. After appointing a distinguished group of technocrats and diplomats to his cabinet, Anand pledged to serve only for four months to prepare the country for parliamentary elections, to repair the damage done to the nation's reputation, and to revitalize the economy.

Anand succeeded in demoting the kingdom's top military leaders who were deemed responsible for the violence. He removed important state enterprises from military control, and planned for the second national election in one year.

The September 13, 1992 election was considered one of the fairest in Thai history because of the oversight of "watchdog" groups, a coalition of pro-democracy parties, plus one party which had supported the military in the previous administration, formed a government under the leadership of a civilian politician as leader of the country. Chuan Leekpai, the soft-spoken, fair-minded, unpretentious, non-charismatic, honest, moderate leader of the Democrat Party from Trang Province in the south assumed the position of Prime Minister. He led a 207 seat coalition in the 360 member House of Representatives. Prime Minister Chuan's challenge was to find a balance between democratic rule and sensitivity to the traditional prerogatives of the Thai military.

Chuan led the country from September 1992 to May 1995, becoming the longest-serving elected civilian prime minister in Thai history. His coalition eventually fell as a result of differences and demands among the ruling political parties that Chuan had tried to settle. New elections were called for July 2, 1995.

The 1995 election can be interpreted as a further evolutionary step toward democratic government in Thailand. The military remained on the sidelines, made no attempt to intervene, and stayed scrupulously neutral,

even after the incoming defense minister, Chavalit Yongchaiyuth, revised the annual military reshuffle list. Moreover, there was much competition for electoral power as twelve political parties and 2,300 candidates vied for the 391 House seats. The press was unfettered so that Thais could read great detail about the candidates.

Although the parties did no present coherent platforms, individual candidates, representing the parties, talked at campaign stops about rural poverty, environmental degradation, Bangkok's notorious traffic, land reform, and bureaucratic inefficiencies. At towns or villages, candidates focused on the specific concerns of the constituents such as roads, bridges, schools, temples, and irrigation. Democrats campaigned on the issue that Chuan Leekpai was the best candidate for the position of prime minister, and that other party leaders were not as well qualified or as honest. Chart Thai leaders, on the other hand, extolled the virtues of their leader, Banharn Silapa-archa, and their view of Chuan as lackluster and complicit in a land reform scandal in southern Thailand.

Banharn's supporters spoke about his vast experience: a billionaire business executive, he had also served six terms in parliament and has held the posts of minister of agriculture, industry, interior, finance, and transportation and communications. He was promoted as a mover and shaker who could cut through the bureaucratic red tape that had hamstrung Chuan. His admirers argued that he was most experienced in meeting the needs of his local constituents, and could use that same strength nationally as prime minister. Rural Thais viewed the elites' contempt as the typical arrogance of those who do not appreciate the positive aspects of patronage-oriented politics.

Banharn's opponents campaigned that he was corrupt, a close associate of sleazy rural "godfathers" and public figures. He was disdainfully described as "Mr. ATM" to remind Thais that he had bought himself into power. He was scorned by Bangkok voters and by the intellectuals who viewed him as a nouveau riche country bumpkin who had no class or education.

The openness and criticism of vote buying, and the divergent viewpoints about the two major contenders for the position of prime minister, reflects the high degree of politicization of candidates and voters. Opposition attacks on government policy during the campaign were reminiscent of the same behavior in Western democratic nations. The election was doing precisely what elections are supposed to do in democratic societies: presenting voters with a wide array of choices about policy, character, and leadership.

to 5 million baht (\$200,000) to any competing candidates with a good chance of success who would switch parties. In addition, voters were offered 100 to 300 baht (\$ 4 to \$ 12) if they promised to vote for particular candidates. The wealthy Chart Thai Party, led by Banharn Silapa-archa, was targeted by the press, official anticorruption organizations, and other parties as the chief culprit.

Vote and candidate buying were an indication of candidate self-interest, without concern for party policy positions, and reflected the continued importance of personalism and patronage in Thai politics. throughout the kingdom signs were erected telling people that to sell a vote was to sell the nation, but the perception of voters and the media was that the best way to assure election was to purchase the office, affiliate with the provincial godfathers, and promise the voters everything.

Corruption has undermined the policy process as well. Increased civilian domination of politics is generally considered a positive step toward democratization, but it also facilitates corruption. The civilian presence is a two-edged sword because the civilians have to give favors to business associates, bureaucrats, and others in order to keep their clout. Thus, there are constant calls for politicians to quit interfering with the technocratic bureaucrats. Increased involvement by elected politicians in the budget was drafted by a committee of technocrats, there might be less corruption and the national interest might be better met, but the process would be less democratic. Ordinary Thais have little ability to influence policy making. Once elected, legislators lose interest in their constituents until the next election.

Democracy requires that the major government institutions play the role for which they were established. However, the political party system remains weak without either a coherent ideology or mass base. Few political parties have endured because they tend to center around individual leaders rather than long-term ideologies. Part of the reason for party weakness stems from the fact that the nation's provinces have multimember districts, and voters can vote for a candidate strictly in their particular electoral district. Hence, candidate strictly in their particular electoral district. Hence, candidates run not only against competitive party candidates, but also against their own party colleagues. There has been a consequent breakdown of party loyalty and discipline.

Most Thais vote for the candidate who has paid them or who most effectively promises to meet their needs. In

the South in the 1995 election (where the Democrats maintained their hold on power by winning 46 of 51 contested seats), and in Bangkok, there is a semblance of party voting. In other areas voters more often split their votes among more than one party.

Further stress stems from the generally negative response Prime Minister Banharn received to his appointed cabinet. Mad up of politicians loyal to Banharn, and bereft of technocrats or famous, respected leaders the cabinet is highly volatile and unstable. Financial support from big business has provided party leaders with resources they need to perpetuate their power, although these resources have, ironically, kept parties from seeking a broader electoral base from non-wealthy constituents. The general perception of the cabinet as corrupt and inexperienced has thwarted Banharn's attempt to forge an administration that is respected throughout the Kingdom, and has raised questions about the administration's ability to solve such problems as Bangkok's traffic, inadequate roads, pollution, the lack of sufficient water, poor communications, and decaying schools.

Events overcame Banharn's ability to lead. Corruption and a declining economy undermined his authority. Hence, an election was called, this time leading to the rise of General Chavalit Youngchaiyut, leader of the New Aspiration Party. Chavalit had a reputation for getting things done, but his administration was also unable to meet the rising problems facing the kingdom. Most notably, the Thai economy in June 1997 plummeted with the eventual devaluation of the baht and the decimation of the Thai stock market. Thailand was faced with its worst economic crisis ever, and the Chavalit administration had no plan for recovery.

Once again, a Thai Administration could not face up to the challenges and stepped down, this time leading to the return of Chuan Leekpai, head of the opposition Democrat Party, as the new Prime Minister. Chuan surrounded himself with famous technocrats and began an immediate plan to resolve the economic problems.

Semidemocracy

The foregoing discussion must be viewed in terms of Thailand's status as a developing nation and its incremental, albeit inexorable transition to democracy. When Thailand is evaluated on its record of citizen participation, electoral competition, and civil liberties, Thailand ranks as a semidemocracy.

Thailand has all the formal-legal trappings of

democracy: freely elected representative National assembly, executive accountable to the people, competition for office, and a multiparty system. On the other hand, personalism and patronage are the major features of these institutions. The military sits on the sidelines ready to intervene if its perceived interests are thwarted. This semidemocracy exhibits features compatible with Thai values who desire stability, order, security, an monarchy.

The new government must respond to severe environmental deterioration that threatens the nation's economy and value system. the gap between the rich and poor is rising, while Westernization continues to undermine traditional Thai values. To solve these and other problems will require superb leadership by hitherto untested rulers. Rather than moving the nation toward a more progressive democracy, the 1995 elections set

back the clock with the reemergence of old-style politicians and money interests. The change in government in 1997 returned the clock to its correct time.

At the same time, Thailand is well placed to continue its semidemocracy. Information is ubiquitous from newspapers, radios and televisions. The latter can be found in virtually every village. Westernization has pervaded the nation, with values that are less traditional and deferential, and more pragmatic and self-oriented. Thais have shown a remarkable capacity to cope with change. The routinization of democratic processes, the rapid economic development enjoyed by all socio-economic classes, the commitment to free market forces, the successful control of birth rates, and the absence of major internal and external threats bode well for the future of the nation and the future of democracy.

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