“Good Coup”
Gone Bad
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“Good Coup” Gone Bad
Thailand’s Political Developments since Thaksin’s Downfall

edited by
Pavin Chachavalpongpan

INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES
SINGAPORE
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FOREWORD

Even at the best of times Thai politics has not been easy to understand, and now, late in the reign of a revered and activist monarch, it is even more difficult to comprehend. Constitutions, sometimes written by the winning side that has taken power by extra-constitutional means, come and go with astonishing frequency. Since the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932 military coups have intervened so frequently (eighteen times) that regime change by force seems to be an integral part of the political process. Bloodshed often attends Thailand’s political struggles. In the past four decades, the military has taken its arms into the streets several times, and national elections see a fair number of vote canvassers and journalists murdered. Little wonder that turbulence, polarization and violence describe Thai politics all too well.

The motivation for the army to cut short the electoral cycle is its self-appointed responsibility to protect the monarchy if it deems the supreme institution to be threatened. The army is jealous of its prerogatives especially with regard to promotions in the upper echelon of the officer corps. Wary of the slightest political interference, it insists on control over its own line management. Thai governments that have attempted to reform the military’s relationship with the parliamentary system have been promptly dispatched, as happened in 1991 and 2006. As a result of the violent crackdown and arson attacks in Bangkok in April–May 2010, the army’s reputation briefly plummeted, but this was reversed by its civic activism in offering a helping hand to communities affected by the floods in late 2011. Once again, the army proved its ability to adapt and respond to changed circumstances in a popular way.

The 1997 constitution, which was abrogated in 2006, may have been as flawed as its critics have charged, but it held promise. Crafted during the 1997 Asian financial crisis after a string of shaky coalition governments,
it aimed to reform the political system, curtail money politics and establish a strong executive. In response to the conditions for “good governance” attached to the IMF loan programme that aimed to lift the country out of the financial crisis, Thai public intellectuals seized on “good governance” and translated it as *thammarat*. For its architects and many of its advocates, the concept of *thammarat* would imbue politics and government with moral righteousness, truth and law. Good governance Thai-style was supposed to discipline the Thai state and create a legitimate space for civil disobedience against it.

Alas, as events unfolded, good governance Thai-style had an authoritarian strand as well as communitarian and liberal ones. Thaksin’s massive electoral victory in 2005, which led to dominance of the parliament by his Thai Rak Thai party, attracted the charge that he had created a parliamentary dictatorship. Running the country as if he were running a corporation, as he once said, did not mean he would consult widely or nourish a participatory politics. The command-and-control style of leadership that he was comfortable with did not sit well with all constituencies and powerful interests. When reporting on his activities, the Thai-language press is fond of including his rank in the police force, Police Lieutenant Colonel, as if to remind readers of his background in the security services. Although Thaksin had phenomenal electoral success, his leadership style often smacked of anti-democratic methods.

The root meaning of democracy is empowerment of people. Like democracy everywhere it has flourished, Thai democracy had a rocky start and has suffered many setbacks. If dated from 1932, Thai democracy has had a mere eighty years to evolve. In its early decades, it was handed down from above, an elite project in which the people were asked to abide by certain rules in exchange for their citizenship. This democracy-from-above was more about bureaucratic control and the legitimacy of authoritarian government than about empowerment of people. Even in the relatively liberal period following a new constitution in 1974, democracy was propagated through manuals “taught” by officials in public education programmes. The liberal winds of this period subsided long ago, and nowadays, once again, democracy has been thwarted by state institutions, powerful interests, and elite attitudes that discount the value of rural and subaltern votes.

Many upper class Thais hold rural voters in contempt, even as they cling to mythical memories of village society as a haven of tranquillity.
and self-reliance. Economic growth over the past generation has brought prosperity to many households, but it has also increased the inequalities. Class cleavages, the rural-urban divide, and regional disparities have given rise to new social forces that the political system in its present configuration is unable to accommodate. Yet, it is worth remembering that the mass mobilizations and street rallies that have captured international attention in the past two decades are not new. The political conflicts that escaped from the parliament as the People’s Alliance for Democracy and the red shirts took their campaign into the streets from late 2005 have long featured in Thai politics.

The expert authors in this book have chosen to study the social forces and mass mobilizations unleashed by economic change against the backdrop of a familiar political system that has been dysfunctional since the 2006 coup. Mistranslated often as “constitutional monarchy”, the official designation of the political system is best translated as “a democratic system headed by the king”. In that literal translation lie both expectation and limitation. The fervent, pro-monarchy, ultranationalism that has gripped Thailand in recent years has pressured state institutions to remain vigilant about the kingdom’s territorial integrity and sovereignty, a topic taken up by three essays on the Cambodian border dispute, the Deep South and the increase in surveillance by the security services in their pursuit of lèse-majesté cases.

It is striking that electoral politics has faded from view in this collection of essays. Political leadership also receives little attention, another sign of how the political system was damaged by the events of 2006. At the time of writing, Thai political development has arrived at a new normal condition described eloquently in the following pages. Who knows how long it will last?

Craig J. Reynolds
Australian National University
Canberra, July 2012
Marc Askew is currently Senior Fellow in Anthropology, School of Social and Political Sciences, The University of Melbourne, Australia. He has taught and researched in Thailand for over twenty years, with a focus on urban and political culture. Since 2003 he has undertaken sustained periods of fieldwork in Thailand’s south. In addition to newspaper and academic journal articles, his recent publications include *Performing Political Identity: The Democrat Party in Southern Thailand* (2008), (as editor and contributor) *Legitimacy Crisis in Thailand* (2010) and, with Sascha Helbardt, “Becoming Patani Warriors: Individuals and the Insurgent Collective in Southern Thailand”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 35, no. 11 (2012).

Federico Ferrara, receiving his PhD from Harvard University, is assistant professor at the City University of Hong Kong, Department of Asian and International Studies. He previously taught at the Department of Political Science, National University of Singapore. He is the author of *Thailand Unhinged: The Death of Thai-Style Democracy* (2011) and a number of articles on comparative elections and party systems.

Michael H. Nelson is with the Southeast Asian Studies Program, Walailak University, Nakorn Si Thammarat. His research has focused on Thai politics, comparative sub-national government and decentralization, and globalization in Southeast Asia. He published *Central Authority and Local Democratization in Thailand* (1998), and co-authored (with Jürgen Rüland, Clemens Jürgenmeyer, and Patrick Ziegenhain) *Parliaments and Political Change in Asia* (2005). He has also edited the two volumes *Thailand’s New Politics* (2002), and *Thai Politics: Global and Local Perspectives* (2005). His current research interests concern the development of Thailand’s parliamentary system, general elections and voting behaviour, and provincial-level political structures.
Contributors

Nick Nostitz, originally a photographer, has followed closely the red/yellow conflicts since late 2005 with his camera. Not until 2008 has he begun to write articles on the subject more seriously, which could be found on the website New Mandala. He is the author of a series of books entitled Red vs. Yellow, Volume 1: Thailand’s Crisis of Identity (2009) and Red vs. Yellow, Volume 2: Thailand’s Political Awakening (2011). Currently, Nostitz is working on Volume 3 of the series, dealing more profoundly with the violent conflicts on 2010 and their impact on today’s political life of Thailand.


Pavin Chachavalpongpun is associate professor at the Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, Japan. Previously, he had worked as a fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), Singapore, and a lead researcher for Political and Strategic Affairs at ISEAS’s ASEAN Studies Centre. Earning his PhD from the School of Oriental and African Studies, Pavin has written two books: A Plastic Nation: The Curse of Thailand in Thai-Burmese Relations (2005) and Reinventing Thailand: Thaksin and His Foreign Policy (2010). Pavin is also an editor of Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia.

David Streckfuss is an honorary fellow with the University of Wisconsin-Madison who has lived in Thailand for more than twenty years. He is interested in legal history, nationalism, and ethnic identities. His book, Truth on Trial in Thailand: Defamation, Treason, and Lèse-majesté, was published in 2011, and he was a contributor to the recent biography, King Bhumibol: A Life’s Work. He also occasionally has pieces published in the Bangkok Post and the Asian Wall Street Journal.

Thongchai Winichakul is Professor of History at University of Wisconsin-Madison, and a Research Fellow at Asia Research Institute (ARI), NUS in
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**Andrew Walker** is an anthropologist in the College of Asia and the Pacific at the Australian National University. He is co-founder of the blog *New Mandala* which provides anecdote, analysis and new perspectives on Mainland Southeast Asia. His new book, *Thailand's Political Peasants*, was published in 2012.
### Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACD</td>
<td>Asia-Dialogue Cooperation</td>
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<tr>
<td>ACMECS</td>
<td>Ayeyawady–Chao Phraya–Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASEAN</td>
<td>Association of Southeast Asian Nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDA</td>
<td>Constitution Drafting Assembly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDR</td>
<td>Council for Democratic Reform</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEO</td>
<td>Chief Executive Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CMC</td>
<td>Cluster Munition Coalition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNS</td>
<td>Council for National Security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPB</td>
<td>Crown Property Bureau</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPMC</td>
<td>Civilian-Police-Military Command</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DAAD</td>
<td>Democratic Alliance against Dictatorship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FBA</td>
<td>Foreign Business Act</td>
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<tr>
<td>GBC</td>
<td>General Border Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>ICG</td>
<td>International Crisis Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICJ</td>
<td>International Court of Justice</td>
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<td>ISOC</td>
<td>Internal Suppression Operations Command</td>
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<tr>
<td>NESDB</td>
<td>National Economic and Social Development Board</td>
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<tr>
<td>NLA</td>
<td>National Legislative Assembly</td>
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<tr>
<td>NPP</td>
<td>New Politics Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>PAD</td>
<td>People’s Alliance for Democracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PPP</td>
<td>People’s Power Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRC</td>
<td>National Reconciliation Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PTV</td>
<td>People’s Television</td>
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<tr>
<td>SBPAC</td>
<td>Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SBPPPC</td>
<td>Southern Border Provinces Peace Promotion Command</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRT</td>
<td>Thai Rak Thai Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UDD</td>
<td>United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization</td>
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