

# The Rise and Fall of Electoral Violence in Thailand: Changing Rules, Structures and Power Landscapes, 1997–2011

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PRAJAK KONGKIRATI

*From 1997 to 2006, the 1997 Constitution and its newly designed electoral system and the rise of a strong populist party led by Thaksin Shinawatra and the 2006 coup transformed local political structures and power balances. Thaksin's ambitious goal of monopolizing the political market raised the stakes of electoral competition, forcing provincial bosses to employ violent tactics to defeat their competitors. Consequently, the demand for and supply of electoral violence increased, as witnessed in the 2001 and 2005 elections. After the 2006 coup, political settings at the national and local levels underwent another major change. The royal-military intervention in the electoral process combined with growing ideological politics stifled and marginalized provincial bosses, thereby decreasing the demand for violence. As a result, incidents of violence during the 2007 and 2011 elections declined. Thai electoral politics and its pattern of violence are currently in a state of transition. Some new elements have emerged, but they have not yet completely replaced the old ones. The exercise of privatized violence by the provincial bosses was a remnant of the political and economic order established in the 1980s. This unsettling phenomenon will not entirely disappear until the patrimonial structure of the state is radically transformed and personalistic fighting over government spoils and rent-distribution are substantially reduced.*

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PRAJAK KONGKIRATI is a Lecturer in the Faculty of Political Science and Head of the Southeast Asian Studies Center, East Asian Institute, Thammasat University, Prachan Road, Bangkok 10200, Thailand; email: prajak@yahoo.com.

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The period from 1997 to 2011 was highly transformative and turbulent for Thai politics and society. Within one decade, there were five elections (including the nullified 2006 election), six prime ministers, two constitutions, one military coup and countless violent clashes between state security forces and colour-coded mass movements which led to a large number of deaths and injuries. Parliamentary democracy and electoral institutions underwent a dramatic change. Initially, the new Constitution and associated political reforms produced a strong and stable civilian administration and political party structure. Programmatic politics and policy-based campaigning played increasingly important roles in shaping electoral outcomes, even though the particularistic elements of patronage, pork, personality and coercive force still existed. Political party and electoral institutions were, more than ever, strengthened and meaningfully connected to a majority of the electorate. Direct elections at the local level enabled by decentralization helped create stronger linkages between the electorate and elected politicians. However, the military coup in 2006 derailed the legitimacy and development of parliamentary democracy. The traditional royal-military-bureaucratic power alliance, which lost power but was unwilling to participate in electoral competition, employed an old-fashioned, coercive tool — the coup — to capture state power and overthrow the popularly elected government.

The 2006 coup profoundly transformed Thai politics — it polarized the country, exacerbated political divisions and radicalized political participation. As a result, electoral competition was infused with ideological contestation, rather than only particularistic (using vote buying, pork barrel or intimidation) or programmatic (focusing on policy-based) campaigns. The changing rules, landscape and power structure of Thai politics at the national level strongly affected local political settings — the balance of power between political groups and families, and between national parties and local bosses. In addition, the political changes at the local level, structured by national dynamics, shaped the supply and demand of coercion and electoral violence witnessed during this period.

This article demonstrates how major structural and institutional changes that came into effect after 1997 — such as the new Constitution,

electoral and party system, civil-military relations and political party-social movement linkages — have generated and caused fluctuations in the level and kind of electoral violence in Thailand. The rise of a strong party led by telecoms tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra in the shadow of these post-1997 structural changes transformed Thailand's national and local political structures and power balances. Thaksin's ambitious goal of monopolizing political power raised the stakes of electoral competition, forcing provincial boss-type politicians to employ violent tactics to defeat their opponents. As a result, the level of electoral violence increased, as witnessed during the 2001 and 2005 elections. After the 2006 military coup, the political landscape at the national and local levels underwent another major change. The royal-military intervention in the electoral process and turbulent street politics marginalized provincial bosses and overshadowed local political struggles, which resulted in declining levels of violence during the 2007 and 2011 elections (see Table 1).

To understand the peaks and troughs of violence from 2001 to 2011, it is necessary to examine political and institutional changes at the national level and how these affected local power structures. Three national-level factors contributed to transform Thai politics and patterns of electoral violence from 1997 to 2011: the 1997 Constitution and its newly designed electoral system; the political ascent of Thaksin Shinawatra and his strong populist party Thai Rak Thai (TRT); and the 2006 military coup. This article examines and analyses how each of these factors caused fluctuations in electoral violence from 1997 to 2011.

### **The New Electoral Administration System and the 1997 Constitution: Changing Rules and Unintended (Violent) Consequences**

Thailand's political reform movement began after the violent crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrators in May 1992. Reformists defined money politics and vote buying, as well as weak coalition governments, as core problems in Thai politics. Yet just as importantly, they viewed provincial businessmen-cum-politicians as contributing to the country's problems. Journalists and academics deplored rural politicians and accused them of using "dirty" money to buy votes from the rural poor and uneducated voters. They were accused of plundering public resources to win elections and advance their own personal interests. Immediately after the economic crisis of July

Table 1  
**Election-related Violence in National Polls, 2001–11<sup>1</sup>**

<i>Election Dates</i>	<i>Violent Incidents</i>					<i>Death Toll</i>	<i>Wounded</i>
	<i>Assassination attempts</i>	<i>Fights, clashes, brawls, scuffles</i>	<i>Physical intimidation</i>	<i>Bombings</i>	<i>Burnings</i>		
					<i>Total</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Total</i>
6 Jan 2001	39	7	26	7	2	26	84
6 Feb 2005	44	3	25	3	2	30	16
23 Dec 2007	14	1	7	0	1	10	4
3 July 2011	20	12	16	8	0	14	16
Total	117	23	74	18	5	80	120

1997, the push for political reform galvanized vital support from the urban middle class, civil society and business elites as they blamed the crisis on incompetent government run by rural politicians. In October 1997, the legislative assembly passed a new Constitution which had two primary goals: first, to create a capable and stable government, and second, to eradicate vote buying and money politics.<sup>2</sup> The unspoken goal, however, was to prevent provincial politicians from assuming power, as had occurred earlier in the 1990s.

To curb the power of provincial and money politics, the constitutional drafters redesigned the electoral system, election administration and rules governing party organization.<sup>3</sup> An independent body, the Election Commission of Thailand (ECT), was tasked with administering and overseeing electoral processes, functions that had previously been undertaken by the Ministry of the Interior. The ECT was mandated to investigate violations of electoral law and misconduct, and it had the power to counter electoral fraud by disqualifying candidates before or after voting day. These sweeping powers effectively made the ECT one of the key players shaping electoral results — and effectively a gatekeeper to the House of Representatives. However, in the first election held after the promulgation of the new Constitution in 2001, the ECT's lack of experience and capacity, combined with unclear rules and mismanagement, became sources of conflict.

Apart from creating the ECT, the 1997 Constitution adopted several new organizations, mechanisms and rules. For the first time in Thai history, senators were to be elected directly rather than being appointed. Voting was compulsory for all eligible voters and party switching, a popular practice among Thai politicians, was restricted. However, the most far-reaching reform was a major overhaul of the electoral system. As part of an attempt to facilitate coherent political party and party-oriented politics, it replaced the block-vote system (used under the 1978 and 1992 Constitutions) with a mixed-member or two-tiered system.<sup>4</sup> Out of 500 parliamentary seats, 400 seats were elected from single-seat districts on a plurality basis (or first past the post, FPTP), and another 100 seats were elected from a nationwide district on a proportional basis. All political parties had to submit a list of candidates for voters to consider and those on the party list were ranked in order. Each candidate had to decide whether they ran for a constituency or a party list seat, and each voter cast one vote for their district representative and another for a party list. The constituency and party list votes were calculated separately and had no effect on each other. The introduction of a

party-list system aimed to provide an opportunity for technocrats, businessmen, professionals or basically non-provincial boss-type candidates to enter politics without electioneering. It also aimed to strengthen party building and party identity.

The drafters believed that changing to the FPTP system would reduce vote buying because districts were smaller, they reasoned, candidates would be able to cultivate close relationships with their constituents without dispensing particularistic material benefits or cash.<sup>5</sup> The goal was also to allow non-affluent but quality candidates to compete with influential bosses. The drafters also claimed that another advantage of the FPTP system was its lack of intra-party competition (which typically occurred in the block vote's multiple-seat districts).<sup>6</sup> Despite the advantages of the FPTP system on party building and reducing vote buying, it created negative unintended consequences: it intensified electoral conflict in many provinces.

In general, there were no direct causal links between the FPTP system and the frequency of electoral violence; no study demonstrates or proves that the adoption of this electoral system led to greater violent conflict during elections.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the sequence and context of the introduction of FPTP voting in Thailand encouraged greater levels of violence. It is critical to emphasize that the FPTP was taken up after Thailand's long standing use of the block-vote system. The block-vote system helped diminish the intensity of electoral competition by allowing strong candidates to avoid head-on confrontations with each other as it was unnecessary to win the most votes to get elected. For example, in a two-seat district with two rivals standing, both of them could collect just enough votes to win the first and second position to get elected. In the FPTP system, the competition became a zero-sum-game as there could only be one winner per district — only the strongest boss could go to Parliament. Theoretically, the best way for the boss to escape defeat was to avoid running in the same district as his main rival, but this was not an option for everyone. After competing under the same electoral system for decades, each political boss or family had successfully established their own political stronghold, usually their hometown or business headquarters. Running in new districts meant rebuilding vote bases and cultivating new personal support networks — tasks that would normally take years to accomplish. The implementation of the new electoral system thus aggravated existing local conflicts among influential bosses and made elections more prone to violence, precisely in districts in which redrawn electoral boundaries pit two rival bosses

against each other. The cases of highly violent electoral conflicts in Buriram's first electoral district and Prae's second electoral district constituency in the 2001 elections clearly testified to the negative effects of the shift to the FPTP system.<sup>8</sup> Since the political reformists were primarily focused on vote-buying, they overlooked the violent consequences of the newly-adopted system and had not prepared a plan to mitigate conflict.<sup>9</sup>

While the new electoral system was implemented nationwide, not every district faced violent competition. The FPTP intensified political cleavages but was not a direct cause of electoral violence. The real causes resided in local settings — existing local political arrangements and the ways in which each political boss responded to the changing institutional rules.

### **The Rise of the Populist Party: New Political Actors and the Goal of Political Monopolization**

The economic crisis and the new Constitution created strong incentives as well as opportunities for national-level capitalists to form political parties and capture state power. The emergence of TRT and its participation in national elections after 2001 dramatically changed the landscape of Thai electoral politics. The TRT introduced party-based and relatively more policy-oriented politics, a new style of electoral campaigning and expressed the ambitious goal of creating a single-party government. Electoral competition thus changed along with the relationship between the political parties and provincial bosses. The political changes brought about by the TRT placed provincial elites in a new socio-political environment, forcing them to adjust their strategies accordingly.

Thaksin Shinawatra, a telecommunication business tycoon-turned politician, founded TRT in 1998. By the mid-1990s, he had become a rising political star and an advocate for economic and political reforms. He launched his political career after the May 1992 incident by accepting an invitation to join Chamlong Srimuang's Phalang Tham Party, eventually becoming the party's leader. However, the party's clean, professional image impressed few voters and its popularity did not go beyond Bangkok. Thaksin deserted the party after the 1996 election.<sup>10</sup>

After the 1997 economic crisis and the promulgation of the new Constitution, Thaksin launched the TRT, aiming to be the first prime minister to be elected in the post-reform era. The 1997 crisis created strong incentives for prominent capitalists, including

Thaksin, to directly capture state power. As Thanee Chaiwat and Pasuk Phongpaichit explain: “Business was shocked by the severity of the economic slump, and by the refusal of the Democrat Party government (1997–2001) to assume any responsibility for defending domestic capital against its impact. ... The growing role of the stock market as a generator of wealth and the increased globalization of business raised the potential returns from holding the office of prime minister.”<sup>11</sup> Thaksin led a group of national-level capitalists, who were not severely damaged by the crisis, in pursuing a high-risk, high-return path of direct ownership over their own party, rather than building clientelistic relations with leading bureaucrats and politicians or sponsoring other people’s parties.<sup>12</sup> The new electoral and party system, as explained above, was designed to promote strong executive power and large political parties. This, in turn, facilitated their political ambitions.

The TRT was highly successful in both the 2001 and 2005 elections. A number of studies have explained Thaksin’s political success.<sup>13</sup> I will focus specifically on the impact of Thaksin and his party on local power structures and provincial bosses’ political strategies as they affected the changing supply and demand of electoral violence. Thaksin’s political project and the TRT reshaped local political settings in three significant ways: it changed the balance of power among political bosses and families in each province; intensified extant conflicts among them; and made provincial bosses’ social and political standings more vulnerable.

Thaksin had a different strategy from other political oligarchs of the pre-1997 period. Rather than trying to win a plurality of votes and sharing power with other leaders in a multi-party coalition, he sought to win an absolute majority of votes and form a single-party government. In other words, he and his party strove for monopolistic control instead of the more conventional mode of sharing power. To achieve this goal, he reached out to establish political alliances with prominent provincial bosses in all regions. The failure of the Phalangtham Party in the early 1990s had taught him that elections were won outside Bangkok.<sup>14</sup> As core members responsible for formulating party strategies and policies, the TRT recruited technocrats, bankers, academics, businessmen, retired civil servants, judges, activists and former student leaders. But when the election approached, Thaksin called upon a different type of person — the provincial political lord. The most important bosses were from Phrae and Sa Kaeo in northern and eastern Thailand, respectively — Narong Wongwan and Sanoh Thienthong. Both were



old-fashioned, anti-reformists who controlled two of the largest political factions in Parliament.<sup>15</sup> The public decried the inclusion of these two (and also other provincial godfathers), saying they tainted the party's image. Thaksin disregarded the criticism.

As a practical businessman-turned-politician, Thaksin persistently fielded top bosses in constituency seats on the understanding that the FPTP electoral system was, by and large, a candidate-centred system. TRT ran a complementary two-pronged campaign strategy: a party-list centred campaign for the party-list seats and a candidate-centred campaign for constituency seats. Electoral results from many districts demonstrated that the popularity of the party's policies boosted the candidates' standing and contributed to their success.<sup>16</sup> It was clear, however, that personalistic strategies had not entirely disappeared in the post-1997 political environment. TRT candidates who belonged to eminent political clans relied on both the party brand and their family networks. What was new was Thaksin and the TRT's direct intervention in altering the balance of power among provincial politicians. Their large financial and political support bases helped bosses ally with the TRT to gain the upper hand over rival bosses. The political struggle for monopoly was less daunting for TRT-supported bosses. Those provincial bosses who refused to cooperate with the TRT, on the other hand, struggled for their political survival. The political dynamic of fighting for monopoly and survival between bosses often produced violent outcomes. Only in provinces in which all powerful bosses agreed to unite under the TRT were the elections peaceful. Otherwise, the intervention of the TRT and Thaksin created violence. For example, Nakhon Sawan and Buriram provinces witnessed violent elections in 2001, but peaceful scenarios occurred in both provinces in the 2005 election when all bosses worked together under the TRT. Phrae and Nakhon Si Thammarat faced electoral violence in both the 2001 and 2005 elections because the TRT failed to gain the unanimous support of local bosses.

Thaksin and his party also disrupted existing local political markets. TRT's massive war chest and popular policies attracted many politicians and vote canvassers. There was large-scale migration to the TRT during the run-up to the 2001 election.<sup>17</sup> The TRT's forceful entry into the unstable, volatile local political market intensified political divisions and weakened the extant patron-client relationships. Vote canvassers were quick to notice the changing political surroundings and voters' mood. As a result, most of them wanted to support the TRT. Things went smoothly in cases where

their bosses agreed to run under the TRT, but conflict arose when bosses refused Thaksin's offer. Many vote canvassers defected. The fragile clientelistic relationships broke down, and violence erupted. TRT's efforts to build a strong political machine in a short period of time aggravated political divisions. The volatile situation continued and intensified in the lead up to the 2005 election, when the TRT brand was at its peak and Thaksin announced his party's ambition to win 75–80 per cent of parliamentary seats (instead of nearly 50 per cent as in 2001) and form a single-party government.<sup>18</sup> The number of politicians intending to run under the TRT banner exceeded the number of available seats in each province. Therefore many people were denied party support, including several former TRT candidates. The TRT replaced several old candidates with new ones who were more likely to win. Some newly recruited candidates were, in fact, formerly rivals of the party in the 2001 election. Because of the high turnover of TRT-nominated candidates, the political market in each province remained highly unstable and fluctuating. In sum, the 2005 electoral competition was fraught with defections, betrayals and intra-personal network conflicts that led to a large number of violent incidents.

Lastly, the rise of Thaksin and the populist TRT weakened the political standing of provincial godfathers. After winning a landslide in 2001 and burnishing his popularity with the public, Thaksin pursued a bold strategy to domesticate the power of leading provincial political bosses both within and outside his party. Within TRT, Thaksin sidelined factional leaders as he did not want any bosses to have too much control over party members. Thaksin played a classic game of divide and rule by pitting factions within his party against each other so that no single boss posed a threat to government stability or his supremacy. Prominent cabinet members mainly came from his inner circle, were family-connected allies, or technocrats and professionals, and Thaksin frequently rotated or reshuffled his cabinet members. With less access to ministerial posts and thus rent allocations, the position of provincial bosses significantly declined under Thaksin's rule. Certain disgruntled bosses expressed their grievances and mounted an-intra party campaign against Thaksin's strong rule, but they gained insufficient support from the public and party members. People discredited their acts as old-style, self-serving politics.

Furthermore, Thaksin capitalized on the popularity and success of the "war on drugs" policy to implement a "war on influential people".<sup>19</sup> Launched in May 2003, this policy sought to suppress

influential figures who were accused of obstructing Thaksin's campaign to combat drugs, poverty and corruption. Thaksin explained the urgency and necessity of this policy in a speech:<sup>20</sup>

What we are aiming to do is establishing true democracy ... which is democracy without brokers. Influence must be eradicated. I want to use this opportunity to destroy [the influence] system so the political party can truly belong to the people.

He proceeded to explain what he meant by the term "influential people" (*phu mi itthiphon*): "my definition is simple, influential figures are the ones who use gunmen or officials or political power to harass and oppress people for their own illegal interests". Whereas, "in the past influential figures were subordinates to officials but then they got stronger and became officials' bosses".<sup>21</sup> Thaksin identified hired gunmen, illegal gamblers, smugglers, drugs and human traffickers, illicit loggers, and those who used coercion to win construction contracts as the policy's primary targets. He then warned influential figures to stop enriching themselves from the illegal and/or underground economy, otherwise the government would employ strong-arm tactics to stop them: "the government cannot give license to people to do bad things ... I can assure you that I will be just. My party members also have to be under the rules of equal protection under the same law ... I had no necessity to do this for political gain." On another occasion, in his weekly "meet the Prime Minister" television address on 13 December 2003, he ordered government officials to undertake tough action against national and local mafia-cum-politicians, "You have to adhere strictly to the law. If someone claims they are friends of the government party or powerful figure, you do not have to listen to them. Just ignore them."<sup>22</sup>

Like the war on drugs, the war on influential figures had widespread support from the Thai public because it was seen as tackling a social problem that gravely affected their livelihoods and safety.<sup>23</sup> Immediately after Thaksin's speech, the government set up the national commission for the suppression of influential people and fully mobilized all important state agencies to support this policy: the Interior Ministry, the Ministry of Justice, the police (including Special Branch) and armed forces, the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC), the National Security Council, the National Intelligence Agency and the Office of the Narcotics Control Board. The national commission further identified fifteen subcategories of "influential people" consisting of drug traffickers, illegal construction

bidders, protection/extortion gangs, smugglers of illicit goods, owners of gambling den, sex trade mafias, human traffickers, natural resources plunderers, hired gunmen, debt collection gangs, contraband arms traders and fraudsters. The authorities divided influential people into three levels: village, provincial and national. The national-level mafia was considered the most dangerous, beyond the capacity of the provincial bureaucratic apparatus to suppress, and thus required the employment of national-operated task forces.<sup>24</sup>

Provincial governors and police chiefs implemented Thaksin's policy. They were responsible for drawing up lists of influential people and submitting it to the national commission. The process of list making was full of confusion, lobbying and political maneuvering. In almost every province, the provincial governor and police chief applied different criteria and attempted to outperform one another. Hence each unit came up with their own list and submitted it separately to the national commission. In some provinces, bosses lobbied, bribed or coerced the authorities to remove their name from the list. Some corrupt officials also deleted the names of provincial godfathers, who were their friends, and put their enemies' names on the list instead.<sup>25</sup>

The first lists compiled by provincial offices, released on 9 June 2003, indicated that there was a total of 813 influential people nationwide, 61 of whom were government officials. The suggestion that 32 provinces were without influential bosses, was widely criticized. Political observers said the number of people listed was too low, and it was inconceivable that there were no bosses in 32 provinces, notably notorious Chonburi and Phrae.<sup>26</sup> The public also criticized the absence of "mafia police" or "mafia soldiers", i.e. the police and soldiers who were involved in illegal businesses, on the list.<sup>27</sup> Thaksin was furious with the original list, saying the number was too low and that some obvious names did not appear: "It reflected that provincial governors were either afraid or under patronage of big mafias", he commented. He asked for a new list and threatened to demote local officials who failed to implement this policy effectively.<sup>28</sup> With strong political will from the Prime Minister, government officials carried out this policy forcefully. Two weeks later, the national commission came out with an updated list, increasing the total number of influential people to 2,700.<sup>29</sup>

Even though this was a national policy covering the vast scope of criminality in Thailand, in practice it was a selective provincial-based operation, with the ultimate aim of eliminating or weakening the political networks of provincial strongmen. This political agenda

became obvious when the commission developed specific strategies to suppress the “dark influence” and actual targets. The commission explained it would suppress those “who acted above and against the law and operated as a network” rather than targeting petty criminals. According to the commission, influential networks comprised three components: gang leaders/bosses; “troops” or “tools” (hired gunmen, hoodlums); and supporters (corrupt government officials).<sup>30</sup>

In a nutshell, the “war on influential people” was Thaksin’s political attempt to demolish the political and coercive infrastructure of provincial bosses. It targeted both the local demand for and supply of electoral violence. Moreover, it aimed to destroy the economic base of provincial bosses by suppressing the illegal economy, and in the process enhance the popularity, legitimacy and revenue of the government. For example, while suppressing illegal casinos and underground lotteries, the Thaksin government increased government lotteries and legalized the online lottery. As a result, the government collected more revenue and used it to fund scholarships for poor students thereby boosting Thaksin’s popularity.<sup>31</sup>

The real intent of the policy was to weaken political brokers and/or intermediaries so that Thaksin’s TRT party could relate directly to voters. If the policy succeeded, Thaksin could gain control over provincial MPs both within and outside his party. It was a political strategy to undermine his political enemies, force opposition members to join the TRT and tame recalcitrant TRT factional leaders. By bypassing local brokers, Thaksin could rely on party policies, branding and the party machine to win votes, instead of local personal networks. Undoubtedly, the populist tycoon changed the system to serve his ambitious personal goals. In the process, however, this policy campaign helped bring forth a political transformation from provincial-boss dominated, factional politics to party-dominated, policy-oriented politics led by a populist leader.

Therefore it is only partly correct to understand the war on influential people as Thaksin’s attack on his political opponents.<sup>32</sup> This policy was more ambitious: it was part of his larger project of reorganizing power structures and monopolizing political power. Thaksin’s policy targeted powerful figures, notably political bosses and their key vote canvassers from all political parties, including TRT. The areas targeted were provinces dominated by opposition parties and the provinces controlled by TRT MPs who appeared to be too independent. Police were active in many southern provinces, notably in the Democrat Party strongholds of Nakhon Si Thammarat,

Trang, Surathani, Satun, Phang Nga, Phuket.<sup>33</sup> Suphanburi, the stronghold of the Chart Thai Party leader Banharn Silapa-archa, was also targeted. A task force of 200 policemen raided fifteen houses, seized weapons and arrested three people on charges of possessing firearms. All those arrested were Chart Thai Party's vote canvassers. In Samutprakarn, police arrested a number of local politicians and seized heavy weapons; most of those arrested were connected to the Atsawahem family, a powerful political dynasty who had dominated the province for decades.<sup>34</sup> But the two provinces which were the commission's main focus were Phrae and Kanchanaburi, the two polarized provinces that the TRT had struggled to monopolize. In the 2001 elections, the Democrat Party fiercely contested the TRT's attempt to grab all the seats in these two provinces but neither gained full control.<sup>35</sup>

Thaksin chose Kanchanaburi as the pilot province for his campaign, arguing that it contained the highest number of mafia, hired guns, illegal arms traders and protection racketeers. "We are going to wipe out all of them [influential people]", said Defence Minister Thammark Isarangura, "in Kanchanaburi, the mafia are connected and backed up by MPs. We will beat them up. Believe me, the locals will not vote for them in the next election."<sup>36</sup> In early July 2003, police conducted house raids on two leading Democrat MPs, Pracha Phothiphiphit and Paiboon Pimphisitthawon, and accused them of being involved in the murder of TRT's key vote canvassers. Both were former *kamnan*-turned-businessmen who had risen to power by enriching themselves from business enterprises. They were respected and feared in the underworld community in Kanchanaburi. After the 2001 election, many vote canvassers were murdered in the province over conflict between these two *kamnans* and TRT members.<sup>37</sup> Knowing they were dealing with influential bosses, the government also used certain legal tools (prosecutions for money laundering, tax evasion, etc.) to supplement the use of force. In early October, the police issued arrest warrants for Pracha and his wife on charges of using coercive force against other contractors during the bidding process for construction projects and also accused them of being mafia leaders. Fearing he was next in line, Paiboon sent a signal to Thaksin that he wanted to make a political deal. A few months later, Paiboon went to greet Thaksin and other ministers when the cabinet had a special meeting in Kanchanaburi. In front of journalists, Thaksin told Paiboon, "Do not worry. You will be an opposition member for just a little while."<sup>38</sup> In the 2005 election, Paiboon abandoned his teammate Pracha, switching to TRT and

helped them defeat the Democrat Party. Meanwhile, Pracha and his wife were convicted and given five-year sentences for manipulating bidding and their assets were seized by the authorities.<sup>39</sup>

The campaign targeted many other boss-style politicians or those affiliated with political bosses. At the campaign's peak from May to December 2003, many prominent godfathers found themselves embattled. Some of them were put under investigation, arrested and/or convicted, some mysteriously disappeared or went into exile and a few of them were shot dead by unknown assassins. The media called 2003 "the year of the godfathers' obliteration".<sup>40</sup> Ultimately, most of the embattled bosses decided to move to TRT.<sup>41</sup> A Democrat Party female godmother and Phrae MP, Siriwan Pratsachaksattru, put up a strong fight against Thaksin and his campaign. She was a major obstacle to the TRT's effort to achieve a power monopoly in Phrae, and the TRT made use of the war on influential people policy (among other political tools) to weaken her power base. Political warfare between them turned extremely violent. When the Democrats came out to defend Siriwan and Pracha, Thaksin retorted:

The Democrat Party should not protect the wrongdoers. If a party sponsors godfathers, the party faces a problem. The TRT party is no exception. If any members acted like godfathers and did not stop, they would be punished. I would not keep them in the party.<sup>42</sup>

To the surprise of many, Thaksin largely kept his promise. In many TRT strongholds, police searched TRT vote canvassers' houses and arrested local politicians who were political aides of TRT MPs.<sup>43</sup> By the end of 2003, Thaksin had succeeded in asserting absolute control over all leading bosses in his party. In effect, he became the boss of bosses. His aggressive policy tools, though controversial, were effective. His government continued to suppress influential people in 2004, but in a less spectacular fashion. Police revitalized the operation a few weeks before the February 2005 general election, focusing on suppressing local bosses and gunmen (especially in the south), justifying it as an attempt to make the election free, fair and peaceful.<sup>44</sup> When campaigning started, all opposition parties and bosses were already demoralized as they struggled to protect their fragile political territory. Thaksin and his party machine, by contrast, entered the 2005 election with confidence and emerged resounding winners. The 2005 election was far from peaceful. The national political struggle shaped local

political dynamics by turning competition in many districts into electoral warfare pitting those seeking to assert a monopoly against those seeking to protect their turf.

The Thaksin administration was the first in modern Thai history to attempt to domesticate and eliminate local bosses who had, for many decades, acted as political intermediaries in the Thai political system. Past governments, both dictatorial and democratic regimes, either had no political will, legitimacy or capacity to pursue this goal. The military-led governments of 1947–73 and 1991–92 lacked the determination to suppress local strongmen. Army leaders never perceived provincial bosses as political threats, as all provincial bosses were relatively weak in comparison to the armed forces. Also, they needed provincial bosses to assume the role of political broker for the military-supported parties. Semi-democratic and civilian administrations in the 1980s and 1990s were not inspired to take on provincial bosses as it would have destroyed their fundamental powerbases.<sup>45</sup> For Thaksin, by contrast, provincial bosses posed a threat to his populist party-building and he knew that his electoral success would be more sustainable without reliance on local godfathers. The implementation of this policy reflected the emergence of a new type of politics and a new relationship between Thaksin, who was a national businessman-cum-populist party leader, and provincial businessmen-cum-politicians.

Ironically, precisely by the time Thaksin had achieved his monopolistic control over electoral politics, he had rendered himself vulnerable to another sort of threat. His royal-military-bureaucratic opponents understood that the only way to unseat Thaksin was by non-electoral, extra-parliamentary means. Thaksin's monopolization of the political market made his enemies realize that it was impossible to defeat him in an electoral contest. All major opposition parties boycotted the 2006 general election. In September 2006, the royal-military alliance staged a coup to topple Thaksin. This historic coup transformed Thai politics into a new era, and once again changed the political landscape at both the national and local levels.

### **The 2006 Coup Aftermath: Ideological Struggles and the Militarization of Thai Politics.**

While the TRT's landslide election victory in 2005 brought self-confidence and political aggrandizement to Thaksin, it generated fear and perturbation among his opponents. Since 2001, Thaksin



and his party had succeeded in undermining rival political parties' power bases and provincial politicians' territorial power. But Thaksin had not been able to subvert extra-parliamentary forces, in particular the royalist networks and the military — an alliance constituting the most formidable sources of traditional power in the Thai polity.

Soon after the 2005 election, those opposing Thaksin (including, for example, business rivals and personal foes, NGO activists, journalists, academics, human right defenders and the urban middle class) joined forces against his government. By early 2006, Thaksin's legitimacy had been eroded because of his controversial business dealings, and the anti-government movement led by media mogul Sondhi Limthongkul and Major-General Chamlong Srimuang gained crucial momentum.<sup>46</sup> In an attempt to revitalize his legitimacy, the embattled Prime Minister dissolved Parliament and called for a snap election in April 2006. All the main opposition parties (the Democrat Party, the Chart Thai Party and the Mahachon Party) decided to boycott the election, leaving the TRT to run unopposed. Political party leaders claimed that Thaksin no longer had legitimacy and that the snap election was an attempt to divert public attention from a business scandal he was embroiled in. The sudden dissolution, they argued, also left opposition parties no time to prepare for an election campaign.<sup>47</sup> After the release of the election results, showing that TRT had won 460 of the 500 seats, anti-Thaksin leaders refused to accept the results and declared they "would go on rallying until Thaksin resigns and Thailand gets a royally-appointed prime minister".<sup>48</sup> The political situation reached an impasse.

Unexpectedly, on 25 April 2006, the King gave two speeches to senior judges from the Administrative and Supreme Courts, questioning the democratic nature of the April general election. He commented that dissolving Parliament and calling a snap election (within thirty days) might not have been correct. At the end of his speeches, the King called on the judges, and those from the Constitutional Court to work together to resolve the current political crisis.<sup>49</sup> Certainly, the King's speeches constituted royal intervention in the midst of the crisis. Two weeks later, the Constitutional Courts nullified the April 2006 election and ordered a new election.<sup>50</sup> Scheduled for 15 October 2006, the election never took place.

On 19 September 2006, a group of army leaders staged a coup, the first in fifteen years. The timing of the coup was significant as it occurred a month before the proposed election. The coup-makers

clearly wanted to halt the electoral process. In this sense, the 2006 coup fits the definition of electoral violence as “an act or threat of coercion, intimidation, or physical harm perpetrated to affect an electoral process, of which violence may be employed to influence the *process* of elections — such as efforts to delay, disrupt, or derail a poll”.<sup>51</sup> It was the first time in Thai history that a coup had been carried out with the intention of directly interfering in the electoral process.<sup>52</sup> The post-1997 style of electoral politics had become a major threat to the royal-military alliance’s standing. Because the alliance could not beat Thaksin and his political machine at the ballot boxes, they changed the mode of the game and staged a coup to eliminate Thaksin. The consequences of the coup were drastic. From 2006–11, political contestation moved from the electoral arenas to the street. This changed the mode of conflict and the pattern of political violence as state and street violence took the place of electoral violence.

Many pundits and coup-supporters praised the 2006 coup because it was “bloodless”. As political events unfolded, however, it was clear that in terms of its subsequent implications this coup was the most violent in Thai history. The coup led to a large number of deaths and injuries as it exacerbated conflict, deepened political polarization and created widespread confrontation between security forces and demonstrators and among opposing groups of protestors. Looking at the political phenomena Thai society has witnessed since the coup, one can see the emergence of many different forms of violence: the growth of militant social movements (both the Yellow and the Red Shirts); the use of gangs and thugs in political confrontations; the presence and involvement of paramilitary forces (either affiliated with the movement or acting independently) in protests; violent clashes between protesters affiliated with different movements; the resurgence of the politicized army and its violent suppression of citizens; the selective use of force by security groups in dealing with protesters; the use of snipers by the army to kill protesters; the assassination of mass movement leaders in broad daylight under the emergency decree; the assassination of rogue soldiers; assassination attempts and intimidation of privy council members, prime ministers, judges and election commissioners; bombings in the capital targeting government buildings and the protest sites; the widespread use of weapons on all sides; and conflict within the army and between the army and the police.

The April–May 2010 military crackdown — when the government ordered the army to suppress the Red Shirt demonstration led by the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) who occupied some areas of central Bangkok between March and May 2010 — marked the culmination of political violence. The confrontation between the military and the Red Shirts around the perimeter of the protest site resulted in the violent crackdown of 19 May 2010 in which ninety-four people were killed and thousands were injured.<sup>53</sup>

The locations, methods, perpetrators and victims of violent incidents in the post-coup era indicate a new pattern of violence in Thailand. The army has returned to the political theatre as the main actor, committing the most violent acts and being responsible for a high proportion of the death toll. The April–May 2010 crackdown represented the most violent political suppression in modern Thai history, with the official death toll exceeding those of the three previous political crises: the student-led uprising in 1973, the massacre in 1976 and the pro-democracy demonstrations in 1992.<sup>54</sup> The resurgence of state violence since the 2006 coup has been detrimental to the progress of parliamentary democracy as it has worked directly against electoral institutions. In the past, state violence had been prevalent during the military dictatorial regimes from the 1950s to 1970s, in which state agents illegitimately acted against political dissidents and enemies. During the mid-1980s, however, the practice of state violence had been gradually taken over by private killings among politicians and local bosses competing for control over the socio-economic resources within a given territory, and for the MP positions. Candidates' use of violence was aimed at winning elections, not disrupting or destroying the electoral process. It was violence in the realm of electoral competition, and respectful to electoral democracy.

When state violence was revitalized after the 2006 coup, it was not directed against individuals as was the case in the past; rather, it was targeted against political forces and institutions that underpin electoral democracy. While the electoral violence from 1979 to 2005 stemmed from the vulnerability of political bosses, the post-2006 coup violence stemmed from the vulnerability of traditional elites and the erosion of their power. Unelected elites resorted to violence to reconsolidate their power and undermine their opposition. First of all, the 2006 coup overthrew the popularly elected government and prevented an election. Second, the military-backed government of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva (2009–11)

used violence to suppress the electorate's political demands and to derail the electoral process.

Before resorting to violence, Thaksin's opponents had tried legal avenues to undermine his political networks. On 30 May 2007, the Constitutional Court delivered a ruling which dissolved TRT and banned 111 executive party members from any involvement in political affairs for five years. The judges found some TRT party executives guilty of violating the electoral laws in the April 2006 election.<sup>55</sup> The TRT members created a new party called Palang Prachachon (People's Power Party or PPP) led by veteran politician Samak Sundaravej to stand in the 2007 election. Running on a populist policy platform and benefitting from Thaksin's popularity, the PPP was victorious and formed a coalition government. However, on 9 September 2008, the Constitutional Court delivered a controversial decision disqualifying Samak from the premiership.<sup>56</sup> The majority of the PPP and the coalition parties then voted for Somchai Wongsawat, Deputy Prime Minister and the brother-in-law of Thaksin, to be the new premier on 17 September 2008. Somchai stayed in power for only three months and was forced to step down in the middle of the Yellow Shirt's occupation of Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi Airport, after the Constitutional Court passed a ruling dissolving the PPP on charges of electoral misconduct.<sup>57</sup> Immediately after Somchai stepped down, military leaders forced some of Thaksin's allies to switch sides and vote for Abhisit to be the new prime minister on 15 December 2008.<sup>58</sup>

In the end, these various legal measures failed to undermine Thaksin and his network of support, as the Red Shirt movement emerged to support those parties allied to Thaksin and oppose the junta-backed government. The Red Shirts were a cross-class political movement drawn mainly from the lower middle class in both rural and urban areas who were farmers, labourers, small shopkeepers, vendors, self-employed workers or low-rank civil servants, and frustrated at how their elected government had been toppled, their choice of political party dissolved and their electoral rights deprived. In 2009 and 2010, hundreds of thousands came to Bangkok to ask for the dissolution of Parliament and for Prime Minister Abhisit to be replaced, whose rise to power they deemed to be illegitimate. The protesters wanted to go to the ballot to exercise their basic political rights; they were not pursuing armed struggle or calling for the overhaul of the political system. Viewed this way, Abhisit's deployment of the armed forces (with the tacit support of traditional elites) to suppress the demonstrators had two aims: to silence the

voice of urban and rural mass electorates and to delay the re-establishment of electoral democracy. Collusion between the civilian administration of Abhisit and the traditional elites departed from previous patterns of repression. The civilian government authorized and carried out the crackdown and the government was able to maintain its power even after committing mass murders.<sup>59</sup> In the post-2006 coup era, the traditional elites and the Democrat Party had become indispensable political partners.<sup>60</sup>

Post-coup killings were more spectacular and public, in stark contrast to the secretive (but simple) nature of electoral violence among politicians.<sup>61</sup> The new mode of violence included the use of heavy weapons; the deployment of snipers; drive-by shootings; the use of car bombs and rocket-propelled grenades. While electoral killings normally happened in the provincial or remote areas (even if the ultimate aim was seizing a slice of political power at the national level), the new type of killings happened in the capital city, and not in rural areas, as Bangkok was repeatedly the stage for violent clashes between the demonstrators and the state apparatus. While electoral violence was decentralized, state and street violence was centralized.

What made the latest episode of political violence more complex and worrying was the use of coercive force by social movements. Both the Yellow Shirts and Red Shirts rhetorically vowed their commitment to non-violent struggle,<sup>62</sup> but some of their actual practices violated the principles of non-violence. One of the (notorious) novelties of both movements was the use of hired thugs and gangsters to take care of security. Many were retired or active uniformed men who had military training. These armed groups were also working as security guards for the movements and their top leaders. The mobilization style of both movements was provocative and confrontational. It was true that most of the Yellow Shirt and Red Shirt protesters were unarmed and committed to non-violent practices, but the presence of armed elements weakened the legitimacy of the movements and made them prone to militarism and violent clashes. The intensified extra-parliamentary conflict in the forms of violent interactions between the opposing movements and the state overwhelmed the country's political life and weakened parliamentary democratic processes.<sup>63</sup>

The victims of political violence over the past few years have been mostly protesters, movement leaders and government officials, not politicians. In fact, not a single politician has died as a result of the recent chaos. This reflects the minor or diminishing roles of political bosses, political parties and Parliament in the current

crisis. They have disappeared from the scene, and most of the time are merely bystanders. Some politicians were directly involved in the conflict, but as members of the movement, not as MPs.<sup>64</sup> Political parties had an uncomfortable relationship with the mass movements (both the Yellow Shirts and the Red Shirts). There was some evidence of political parties tacitly supporting the movements by giving them resources for mobilization, but most politicians tried to distance themselves from extra-parliamentary politics. There were also internal debates within the Pheu Thai and Democrat Party on how to establish an appropriate relationship with the movements.<sup>65</sup> After 2006, the Pheu Thai and the Democrat Party realized that the Red Shirt and the Yellow Shirt movements' political supports were key to their respective electoral victory, but they did not want the social movement to dominate the party's direction and decision-making. Tension between parliamentarians and political movement leaders thus existed throughout this period. However, the tension manifested in varying degrees from one province to another, therefore having different effects on the provincial electoral competition. In strong Yellow Shirt provinces, one could observe a strong alliance between the Yellow Shirts and the Democrats. The Red Shirt movement was strong in the north and northeast, therefore most Pheu Thai MPs attempted to establish a good relationship with them. Only a few provincial bosses, notably those who had established monopoly power in their territories, did not need the movement's support; still, even these bosses had to avoid a hostile relationship with activists who transformed themselves into political brokers. Bosses pitting themselves against the dominant colour-coded movement in their bailiwicks faced challenges and risked defeat at the polls.

From 2006–11, the two most formidable forces in Thai politics were the coloured mass political movements and the army. Politicians and political parties, as explained above, had been marginalized in this era of street politics. The establishment had weakened Parliament and electoral democracy through army interference, judicial activism and reactionary social movements. An unelected elite minority had asserted extra-constitutional power over the political system. With the frequent dissolution of political parties (see Aim Sinpeng, this issue), the truncation of political space and the deprivation of voting rights, frustrated elements of the electorate had no other option but to engage in mass mobilization. The eruption of street violence was fundamentally a by-product of the royal-army alliance's interference in electoral politics. The

violent clashes between social movements and the armed forces were non-electoral violence that had led Thai society to an impasse and a continued cycle of violence. Nearly everyone felt unsafe in this political environment. To paraphrase Benedict Anderson, it was “violence without progress”.

The struggle between the establishment and those aligned with ousted Prime Minister Thaksin has deeply transformed Thai politics. Overall, it has made political struggle more ideological. Electoral competition is no longer dominated by particularistic campaigns, in which candidates distribute cash, free services or material benefits to voters, but is instead infused with ideological and programmatic debate, focusing on different policy platforms concerning health, education, agriculture, household debt, taxation etc. Voters have different political stances and ideas regarding democratic values. They consider issues of the rule of law, the constitution, judicial activism, court decisions and they question the legitimacy of the coup and royal-army political interference, military suppression and the nature of Thaksin’s rule. These differing values and ideas affect voting.

Colour-coded politics and ideological conflict at the national level fundamentally overrides personal conflicts among political bosses/families at the local level. Political polarization and the ideological nature of politics produced positive effects on voting behaviour and polling conduct. Ideology overshadowed personal conflict or family feuds between rival provincial bosses. Party stance, policy packages and political ideology shaped voting behaviour. With this changing mode of conflict, the demand for assassinations during election campaigns decreased (though did not entirely disappear) as killing one individual candidate or vote canvasser could not substantially alter election results. This is the background to the 2007 and 2011 elections which, as noted above, involved less electoral violence. In the 2011 general election in particular, the ideological contest between anti- and pro-Thaksin movements dominated the election campaign. Especially in the provinces in which the Yellow Shirts or Red Shirts were strong, their members readily volunteered to assist campaigns, in the process replacing the old money-driven, entrepreneurial vote canvassers. With conflict battle lines drawn on ideological lines, hired gunmen were in less demand. For these reasons, the election in many (formerly volatile) provinces went undisturbed. This partly explains the geography of electoral violence. In 2011, violent incidents and casualties were concentrated in the central region, which did not harbour any

strong mass political movement (either Red or Yellow), and thus remained dominated by personalistic, candidate-centred campaigns. Powerful bosses in this region still relied on private killings to maintain political control over their adversaries. In contrast, electoral competition in the north and northeast (the centre of the Red Shirt strength), and the southern region (the bastion of the Yellow Shirts) were relatively peaceful.<sup>66</sup>

In conclusion, from 1997–2006, two major national-level factors — the 1997 Constitution and its newly designed electoral system and the rise of a strong populist party and Thaksin — transformed local political structures and power balances. They unsettled the existing local political order. Thaksin's ambitious goal of monopolizing the political market raised the stakes of electoral competition, forcing provincial bosses to employ fierce tactics to defeat their competitors. Consequently, the demand for and supply of electoral violence increased, as witnessed in the 2001 and 2005 elections. After 2006, because of the coup, political settings at the national and local levels underwent another major change. The royal-military intervention in the electoral process combined with growing ideological politics stifled and marginalized provincial bosses, thereby decreasing the demand for violence. As a result, incidents of violence during the 2007 and 2011 elections declined.

Thai electoral politics and its pattern of violence are currently in a state of transition. Some new elements have emerged, but they have not yet completely replaced the old ones. The exercise of privatized coercive forces by the provincial bosses was a remnant of the political and economic order that was established in the 1980s. This unsettling phenomenon will not entirely disappear until the patrimonial structure of the state is radically transformed and personalistic fighting over government spoils and rent-distribution are substantially reduced.

### **Postscript: The Failed 2014 Election, Anti-election Violence and the Return of the Military**

In late December 2013, having faced massive and fierce street protests over a controversial Amnesty Bill, the government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra chose to dissolve the Parliament and called for a general election on 2 February 2014. The snap 2014 elections witnessed a significant change in the pattern of electoral violence in Thailand. It changed from targeted killings among the rival candidates to mob violence aimed at disrupting the electoral



processes and institutions. The urban middle class protesters, mobilized under the movement called the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) and led by the then deputy head of the Democrat Party Suthep Thaugsuban, employed violent tactics to disrupt electoral voter registration, vote casting and vote counting activities. As a result, six million registered voters were affected by the closure of polling stations across the country. The degree of violence was higher than during the 2006 and 2011 elections, but not higher than the 2001 and 2005 elections. Eventually, on 21 March 2014, the Constitutional Court ruled the 2 February general election invalid. The PDRC's animosity towards the election marked an unprecedented development in the country's prolonged political conflict. The PDRC had destroyed the previously agreed-upon means to settle political conflicts. By boycotting the election, the PDRC broke the peaceful and democratic way for the public to decide who should have the right to govern. The PDRC's rejection of the election escalated the deep-seated political conflict to another level from which it will be difficult for the country to recover.

After the court ruling, the PDRC continued their occupation of many parts of Bangkok, effectively paralyzing the government. The protesters repeatedly called for military intervention to unseat the caretaker government of Prime Minister Yingluck. Their demands were realized when, on 22 May 2014, the head of the army, General Prayuth Chan-ocha, staged a coup which toppled the Yingluck government. The ultimate aim of the military coup, however, was not to fulfill the PDRC's political vision, but to subvert parliamentary democracy so as to pave the way for the army to return to power. Coup leader Prayuth was appointed by the coup-installed assembly to serve as the country's new Prime Minister. Under his premiership, he has brought back the old model of "bureaucratic polity" in which the bureaucracy and military dominate politics under the auspices of the monarchy. The military-controlled government has promised to return democracy to Thailand within one year after the military's "reform" programmes have been implemented. Under repressive military rule, civil liberties are restricted, free speech is censored, criticism is prosecuted and political activity is prohibited. The political situation appears calm on the surface but Thai society is still polarized as ever as the coup was not successful in transforming ideological conflicts; it merely suppressed them with brute force. While the July 2011 election

temporarily brought the country out of a protracted deadly crisis, the 2014 coup has plunged Thailand into a state of uncertainty and (violent) instability, possibly for years to come.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Prajak Kongkirati, “Bosses, Bullets, and Ballots: Electoral Violence and Democracy in Thailand 1975–2011”, Ph.D. dissertation, Australian National University, 2013, p. 173. The national dataset of the temporal and geographical variation of electoral violence is based on primary sources, in particular a careful examination of major daily newspapers. The newspaper reports covered fourteen national elections from 1975 until 2011 and, in each election, both the pre- and post-election periods (from the day after the dissolution of Parliament to one month after election day). I cover the one-month period after the vote as many Thai candidates carry out violence after elections. For methodological discussion regarding the data collection, see Chapter 1 of my dissertation.
- <sup>2</sup> For details on the political reform movement and the 1997 Constitution, see Michael Connors, “Framing the ‘People’s Constitution’”, in *Reforming Thai Politics*, edited by Duncan McCargo (Copenhagen: NIAS, 2002), pp. 37–56.
- <sup>3</sup> See Allen Hicken, “How Effective Are Institutional Reforms?”, in *Elections for Sale: The Causes and Consequences of Vote Buying*, edited by Frederic Charles Schaffer (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2007), pp. 145–60.
- <sup>4</sup> Hicken, “How Effective Are Institutional Reforms?”, *op. cit.*, p. 154.
- <sup>5</sup> See the constitutional drafters’ arguments and debates in Thawinwadi Burikun et al., *Than kho mun rai-ngan kan prachum sapha rang rattathammanun pho so 2540* [Database for Thailand’s Constitution Drafting Assembly Records: The 1997 Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand] (Bangkok: King Prajadhipok’s Institute and Asia Foundation, 1999).
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* However, evidence from other countries shows that smaller districts might in fact facilitate vote-buying as the number of votes needed to win is fewer. Also a single-seat district is still basically a candidate-centred electoral system, generating strong incentives to cultivate personal support networks. See *ibid.*, pp. 47–60. The elections of 2001 and 2005 demonstrated that these caveats had a certain merit.
- <sup>7</sup> The FPTP is widely considered the “simplest form of plurality/majority system ... in which the winning candidate is simply the person who wins most votes”. See “The Systems and their Consequences”, in *Electoral System Design: The New Institutional IDEA Handbook*, edited by Andrew Reynolds, Ben Reily and Andrew Ellis (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2005), p. 35. For a discussion of electoral system choice and conflict, see Arend Lijphart, “Constitutional Design for Divided Societies”, *Journal of Democracy* 15, no. 2 (April 2004): 96–109.
- <sup>8</sup> For other cases of how the introduction of the FPTP system led to confrontational electoral campaigns see Prajak, “Bosses, Bullets, and Ballots”, *op. cit.*, Chapter 5.

- <sup>9</sup> In the 2001, 2005 and 2007 elections, the ECT focused entirely on vote buying and electoral fraud, and turned electoral security over to the police. It was not until the 2011 election, after electoral violence had become a major concern, that it began to be taken seriously by the ECT. Author interview with two senior ETC officers, Bangkok, 8 June 2011; author interview with a senior police officer overseeing election security, 9 June 2011 and 25 July 2011.
- <sup>10</sup> The Phalang Tham Party was founded in 1988. Its major vote base was the urban middle classes in the capital. At its peak in the March 1992 elections, the party won 41 seats nationwide (32 of which were in Bangkok). However, it managed to obtain only one seat in the 1996 election, and Thaksin resigned as party head when the voting was over.
- <sup>11</sup> Thanee Chaiwat and Pasuk Phongpaichit, "Rents and Rent-Seeking in the Thaksin Era", in *Thai Capital after the 1997 Crisis*, edited by Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2008), pp. 255–56.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 257, 258. By comparison, the provincial-level businessmen had pursued a more risky path. A large number of provincial business entrepreneurs had had active involvement in electoral politics since the late 1970s, and by the 1990s, some of them had direct control over political parties. Banharn Silpa-archa was the best example.
- <sup>13</sup> On studies of Thaksin's and the TRT's political successes and pitfalls, see Kasian Tejapira, "Toppling Thaksin", *New Left Review* 39 (May–June 2006): 5–37; Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thaksin: The Business of Politics in Thailand* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2004).
- <sup>14</sup> Thaksin launched his political career after the May 1992 incident by accepting an invitation to join Chamlong Srimuang's Phalang Tham Party, eventually becoming the head of the party. His political experience with the party did not go well: the party split into factions and stood no chance of winning the elections. The party's clean, professional image affected few voters and its popularity did not go beyond Bangkok. Thaksin deserted the party after the 1996 election.
- <sup>15</sup> Narong controlled large numbers of MPs in the North, while Sanoh controlled the Central and Northeast. Both factions combined had more than one hundred MPs.
- <sup>16</sup> In the 2001 and 2005 elections, several of TRT's less influential candidates were able to defeat powerful bosses because of the party's policy platform.
- <sup>17</sup> In addition, the Constitution stipulated that the 2001 election was the last in which politicians were allowed to be a party member for less than 90 days before the election. A large number of politicians took advantage of this regulation. After this election, the 90-day party membership rule would be enforced, greatly benefitting Thaksin's party.
- <sup>18</sup> In the 2001 election, the TRT won 248 out of 500 seats (48 party-list and 200 constituency seats) so Thaksin needed to invite other parties to form a coalition government. In the 2005 election, he succeeded in winning an absolute majority: the TRT won 377 out of 500 seats (75 per cent). They thus became the first party in Thai history to establish a single-party government.

- <sup>19</sup> Between February and May 2003, the Thaksin government launched a countrywide campaign against drug dealers. Within four months, 2,598 alleged drug offenders had been shot dead in apparent extrajudicial killings. Many of those killed were on “blacklists” prepared by police and local government agencies, who used these lists to settle personal disputes and score political points. See Human Rights Watch, *Human Right Watch World Report 2007: Events of 2006* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2007), pp. 329–34.
- <sup>20</sup> Thaksin delivered this speech on 20 May 2003 at the Royal Police Club, Bangkok, to a group of provincial governors, police chiefs and high-ranking officials. For the full speech, see Department of Provincial Administration, *Kan prapram phu mi itthiphon: chabap ruam nangsue sangkan thi kiaokhong* [Suppression of Influential People: A Volume of Related Official Documents] (Bangkok: Asaraksadindaen, 2003)], pp. 3–8.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4, 7.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4, 6; *Daily News*, 14 December 2003.
- <sup>23</sup> According to surveys conducted by the National Statistics Office in 2003 and 2005, more than 86.5 per cent of respondents were satisfied with the government’s campaign to suppress influential figures. See National Statistics Office, *Kan samruat khwam khithen khong prachachon kiaokap kan prapram phu mi itthiphon* [Public Opinion Surveys on the Suppression of Influential People] (Bangkok: National Statistics Office, 2005), p. 15.
- <sup>24</sup> For more details see *Suppression of Influential People*, op. cit., pp. 27–28, 31.
- <sup>25</sup> Journalists reported powerful bosses in some provinces paid 10 million baht to high-ranking officials. The Interior Ministry neither confirm nor deny the possibility of the bribe. *Krungthep Thurakit*, 12 June 2003.
- <sup>26</sup> Provinces with the highest number of influential people were Kanchanaburi, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Mukdahan, Trang, and Chiang Rai (respectively). Out of 813 figures, most of them were connected to illegal gambling, drugs trafficking, hired guns, and natural resource exploitation. See the complete list in *Matichon*, 10 June 2003.
- <sup>27</sup> *Matichon*, 3 July 2003.
- <sup>28</sup> Eventually, his government demoted and transferred some provincial governors and police chiefs out of their areas. In Phang Nga province, a Democrat Party stronghold, both the governor and the police chief were transferred as they came up with only two names of provincial bosses. *Thai Rath*, 10 July 2003.
- <sup>29</sup> The number of influential people increased in every province. For example, in Phrae it rose from zero to 50, and in Buriram it rose from 14 to 45. *Matichon*, 24 June 2003.
- <sup>30</sup> I translated “troops” from the Thai word “kongkamlang” and “tool” from “khrueangmue”. Both words were used emphatically in the commission’s document. See the commission’s strategies in *Suppression of Influential People*, op. cit., pp. 24–25.
- <sup>31</sup> See Chitti Mongkhonchaiaranya, Phongthep Santikun and Sarit Siyothin, *Huai bon din: Rai-ngan kansueksa wichai* [A Report on Lottery] (Bangkok: Faculty of Social Administration, Thammasat University, 2007).

- <sup>32</sup> This conventional wisdom was widely shared among political pundits, journalists, NGO activists, public intellectuals and academics. See *Nation Sudsapda*, 2–8 June 2003, p. 16.
- <sup>33</sup> In Phang Nga, the leading Democrat's brother was named an "influential" figure. The Democrats said there were political motives behind the list to discredit their party members. They also claimed the TRT contacted many politicians in Phang Nga to run for the TRT in exchange for their names being removed from the blacklist. *Matichon*, 9 July 2003.
- <sup>34</sup> Banharn and other Chart Thai's Suphanburi MPs were furious at the attack. One Chart Thai MP said he agreed with government policy but disapproved of the way the government used this campaign to destroy its political opponents. *Thai Rath*, 1 October 2003.
- <sup>35</sup> In Phrae, the Democrats gained one seat, while the TRT won two. In Kanchanaburi, the Democrats won three seats, and the TRT two. See Election Commission of Thailand (ECT), *Statistics and Election Results of the 2001 General Elections* (Bangkok: ECT, 2001).
- <sup>36</sup> *Daily Manager*, 3 July 2003, p. 15.
- <sup>37</sup> From 2001 to 2003, at least six local politicians were shot dead in Kanchanaburi. *Dokbia Thurakit*, 4 July 2003.
- <sup>38</sup> *Khao Sod*, 29 January 2004.
- <sup>39</sup> *Khao Sod*, 21 October 2005. Later in 2007, however, he and his wife were acquitted by the Appeal Court. *Manager*, 25 September 2007.
- <sup>40</sup> *Khao Sod*, 29 December 2003. There was widespread speculation that the murders of the two most powerful bosses in Saraburi and Samutsongkram stemmed from an "official" order as the two of them were on the government blacklist. Rumours of the blacklist made many provincial bosses keep a low profile.
- <sup>41</sup> The most remarkable case was Kamnan Poh of the Chart Thai Party. Kamnan Poh, or Somchai Khunpluem, perhaps then the most famous godfather in Thailand, had allegedly been involved in a number of murder cases in Chonburi but had never been prosecuted. Various political parties and candidates had sought his political support, including the TRT. After the 1995 election he chose to support the Chart Thai Party and helped it win almost every election in Chonburi, including in 2001 when Chart Thai won six seats and TRT had only one. During the war on influential people, police charged him with masterminding the murder of a local businessman and for corruption in the purchase of public land. These charges clearly prompted Kamnan Poh and his family to move to the TRT and in the 2005 election it won all seven seats. "Rocking kamnan Poh, shaking Chonburi political base", *Prachakhom Thongthin*, 26 April 2003; "Court seizes kamnan Poh's B15m bail", *Bangkok Post*, 29 November 2011.
- <sup>42</sup> *Krungthep Thurakit*, 8 July 2003.
- <sup>43</sup> Nakhon Pathom and Chiang Rai were two primary cases. *Matichon*, 10 July 2003.
- <sup>44</sup> The policy campaign also continued after the 2005 election, but its focus had shifted to urban mafias, notably in Bangkok, rather than rural godfathers.

*Siam Thurakit*, 6 April 2005; “Mafia businesses on street”, *Thai Rath*, 18 April 2005.

<sup>45</sup> From the 1980s to the 1990s, provincial bosses rose to the top positions in almost every political party and became their main financial backers. See the discussion on Thai political parties and political godfathers in the pre-1997 period in James Ockey, “Business Leaders, Gangsters, and the Middle Class: Societal Groups and Civilian Rule in Thailand”, Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 1992.

<sup>46</sup> In January 2006, Thaksin’s family sold its shares in Shin Corporation, a large telecommunications company, to Temasek Holdings of Singapore for US\$1.88 billion. His family gained a sizeable tax-free profit from this sale which is legal under Thai law. This incident sparked a series of angry demonstrations in Bangkok.

<sup>47</sup> However, the real reason for the boycott was the opposition parties’ belief that they were going to lose to the TRT again. “Opposition to boycott election”, *Bangkok Post*, 26 February 2006.

<sup>48</sup> Quote in Alan Sipress, “Thai Premier Wins Election, but Crisis Only Worsens”, *Washington Post*, 3 April 2006, available at <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/04/02/AR2006040200501.html>>.

<sup>49</sup> See the King’s full speeches in *Matichon*, 26 April 2006 and *Krungthep Thurakit*, 26 April 2006.

<sup>50</sup> The Constitutional Court based its ruling on a technical problem with the voting process, arguing that the location of the voting booths violated voters’ privacy. *Matichon*, 8 May 2006.

<sup>51</sup> The definition is drawn from Timothy Sisk, “Elections in Fragile States: Between Voice and Violence”, paper prepared for the International Studies Association Annual Meeting, San Francisco, California, 24–28 March 2008, pp. 5–6, emphasis added; see also Jeff Fischer, “Electoral Conflict and Violence: A Strategy for Study and Prevention”, IFES White Paper 2002–01 (Washington, D.C.: International Foundation for Election Systems, 2002).

<sup>52</sup> Previous coups were either conducted to settle conflicts among rival factions within the army or to unseat the government. None of them directly interfered with the electoral process.

<sup>53</sup> For accounts of violent confrontations, clashes and crackdowns in the post-coup period, see International Crisis Group, *Bridging Thailand’s Deep Divide*, Asia Report no. 192, 5 July 2010; Nick Nostitz, *Red VS. Yellow* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2009); Wassana Nanuam, *Lap luang lueat* [Secret, Deceit, and Bloodletting] (Bangkok: Matichon, 2011).

<sup>54</sup> Official records show that 77 people were killed in 1973, 43 in 1976 and 44 in 1992. However, the actual death tolls are believed to be much higher. For the protest from 12 March to 19 May 2010, official figures put the death toll at 89 and about 1,800 injured. However, the death toll collected by an independent group of academics and NGOs, the People’s Information Center, is 94 people. See People’s Information Center (PIC), *Khwanching phuea khwamyutitham: Het kan lae phonkrathop chak kan salai kan chumnum me sa phruetsa pha 53* [Truth for Justice: The April–May 2010 Crackdown] (Bangkok: PIC, 2012).

- <sup>55</sup> The court ruled that TRT's leading members hired certain small parties to run in the April 2006 election to make the election appear competitive and legitimate. *Thai Rath*, 31 May 2007.
- <sup>56</sup> According to the Court ruling, Samak, by appearing in a television cooking show while he was Prime Minister acted in breach of Section 267 of the 2007 Constitution, namely "prohibiting the Prime Minister and Ministers from having any position in a partnership, a company or an organization carrying out business with a view to sharing profits or incomes or being an employee of any person". See Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand B.E. 2550 update B.E. 2554 (Bangkok: Sutphaisan, 2012). The Court ruling led to public debate and wide criticism. *Matichon*, 9 September 2008.
- <sup>57</sup> Like its predecessor the TRT, all 109 executive members of the PPP were banned from politics for five years. Besides the PPP, the Constitutional Court also dissolved two other parties, including the Chart Thai Party of Banharn Silpa-archa. *Thai Rath*, 2 December 2007.
- <sup>58</sup> See details in Wassana Nanuam, *Lap luang phrang phak 3: The last war kongthap tang si suek sailueat cho po ro* [Secret, Deceit, and Camouflage Episode 3: The Last War, Colored Army and Intra-Conflict among Royal Military Cadets] (Bangkok: Matichon, 2010), pp. 58–62, 142–48, 449–54.
- <sup>59</sup> In 1973 and 1992, the crackdowns were carried out by the military-dominated government. Military prime ministers in both events had to step down from power after the bloodshed. The 1976 massacre was undertaken by an army faction (with the support of right-wing forces) and constituted a pretext for the army to topple the then civilian government.
- <sup>60</sup> As noted, the establishment of the Abhisit government was itself made possible by the intervention and manipulation of the royal-military-bureaucratic alliance.
- <sup>61</sup> Thailand's electoral murders are usually perpetrated by a two-gunmen hit team.
- <sup>62</sup> "Thai Red Shirts vow nonviolent anti-govt rally", *Asian Correspondent*, 4 March 2010; for the Yellow Shirts' announcement of non-violent struggle, see their public statement issued in "PAD announced their victory", *ASTV Manager*, 22 June 2008.
- <sup>63</sup> Lessons from the tumultuous period of the Thai democratic experiment from 1973 to 1976 show that in the context of a weak and ineffective semi-democratic state, a violently polarized and confrontational civil society can destabilize or even undermine parliamentary democracy. See the argument in Prajak Kongkirati, "Counter-movements in Democratic Transition: Thai Right-Wing Movements after the 1973 Popular Uprising", *Asian Review* 19 (2008): 101–34.
- <sup>64</sup> The key examples were Somkiat Pongpaiboon of the Democrat Party, leader of the Yellow Shirts, and Jatuporn Phromphan of Pheu Thai Party, the Red Shirt leader.
- <sup>65</sup> Author interview with Pheu Thai MPs and Democrat Party MPs, Bangkok, July and September 2010.
- <sup>66</sup> Except the three southernmost provinces (Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat) which had few violent incidents. Perpetrators shot dead one vote canvasser in Yala, one in Pattani and wounded one vote canvasser and two officials in Narathiwat. *Thai Rath*, 28 June 2011; *Post Today*, 3 July 2011.