Thai Politics: Between Democracy and Its Discontents. **By Daniel H. Unger and Chandra Mahakanjana. Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2016. Hardcover: 251pp.**

What explains the decade-long political conflict in Thailand? More broadly, why has the democracy project remained so elusive for this nation despite having had more than eighty years of trials and tribulations since the end of absolute monarchy? *Thai Politics: Between Democracy and Its Discontents* is among recent scholarship that seeks to provide accounts and explanations for the ongoing political crisis that has engulfed Thailand since 2005. Marked by two coups d'état in 2006 and 2014, some scholars in the field of comparative politics — regime study in particular — have viewed Thailand as a critical case for what constitutes a "reverse wave" of democratization that has plagued several countries experiencing democratic breakdowns in recent years. Are Thailand's democratic failures unique or can they be explained comparatively as part of a broader political phenomenon affecting countries in the Third Wave, as expounded by American political scientist, Samuel Huntington? While this book squarely focuses on Thailand, and is most appealing to readers already intimately interested in the Thai political developments, the parallels and divergences drawn from this case permit valuable comparative insights and lessons for those examining the contours of democracy and its discontents in others parts of the world.

Recognizing both the complexity and diversity of causes underlying Thailand's political conflict, Unger and Mahakanjana posit that the country's democratic failings cannot be explained away by looking solely at material-based explanations. The popularly adopted class-conflict or politico-economic frameworks, the authors claim, tend to place binary divisions of societal and elite interests in terms of the rich versus poor, the urban versus rural, and the traditional versus the new elites. These dichotomies are far too simplistic and all-inclusive that they neither reflect the preferences of the non-aligned nor are attuned to conditions that have led to such binaries in the first place. The authors do not claim that income inequality or intra-elite conflicts based on material calculations do not matter; rather, they merely oppose the "centrality" and the "zero-sum" nature of such divisions as a key driving force of political conflict in Thailand. If wealth disparities could fully capture the heart of the conflict between Thaksin

supporters and their opponents, substantive redistributive policy discussions on taxation or welfare programmes should have figured prominently in the platforms of red- and yellow-shirted movements and their aligned political parties. Instead, the authors believe the conflict has been primarily about "which group would hold power?" — thus incorporating many other factors beyond material interests (p. 8).

Influenced by modernization theory, Unger and Mahakanjana argue that Thailand lacks the appropriate cultural predispositions required to make democracy work in the first place. Thailand has undeniably achieved remarkable economic development, substantial urbanization and the establishment of the dominant and centralized Thai state since its transition to constitutional monarchy. Where the state has come up short has been in developing the political attitudes among the citizenry that would sustain and entrench liberal democratic values. The much cited problem of weak institutions in the Thai political system is not only due to faulty design or a lack of reform efforts, but also to Thai voters being politically "unsophisticated" and "ignorant" (pp. 134–35). Biased media, low quality education, and information censorship have contributed to poorly informed citizens, who may have been more politically engaged and mobilized in the last decade, but have remained subject to elite manipulation and traditional practices like spirit worshipping. The clashes between democratic institutions on the one hand, and these Thai cultural predispositions on the other, have meant that democratic institutions like political parties, elections and the rule of law stand on shaky ground in a society where its people are not well equipped to fully participate in or hold these institutions accountable. Thai citizens remain, as the authors purport, "too authoritarian", "illiberal" and "intolerant" to bring the nation towards a full-fledged liberal democracy (p. 214).

The strength of this book lies in the author's approach to taking political culture seriously. Cultural factors can be amorphous and difficult to grasp let alone measure, leaving an important gap in our current understanding of Thailand's contemporary politics. Unger and Mahakanjana are careful not to claim that socioeconomic or historical factors do not play a key role in contributing to the recent political crisis. They have instead argued convincingly that these structural conditions are too broad and deterministic that on their own cannot account for other factors that do not fit the inequality or class paradigms, for instance. They also caution against advocates

of institutional engineering — those who believe if Thailand can properly lay down the right incentive structures — then the political woes the nation is currently facing can be dealt with. What both authors emphasize is that institutions cannot work properly, no matter how well-crafted their designs are, if the population does not abide by their rules or engage in them fully. Democratic institutions cannot "stick" if the right political culture is not developed as a foundation to support and sustain them.

Looking ahead, students of Thai politics wonder how democratic and liberal values can be developed and practised under the current climate of a military dictatorship. Indeed, Thailand has spent more years under authoritarian than democratic rule since it first introduced elections in 1933. The authors remain both pessimistic and optimistic about the democratic prospects of Thailand, although they have refrained from prescribing concrete measures to build the kind of political culture Thai society needs.

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