

BOOK REVIEWS

***Interpreting Democracy. Capitalism, Democracy, and the Middle Class in Thailand.* By John Girling.** Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1996. 95 pp.

Thailand has been at the centre of the economic storm that has buffeted Asia since the Chavalit government floated the baht in July 1997. Many of the region's maladies have been attributed to political problems — cronyism, corruption, a lack of transparency, and an absence of democracy. John Girling's analytical review of Thailand is therefore most timely.

Girling is a long-established authority on Thailand, having written two well-known textbooks: *Thailand: A Political, Social and Economic Analysis* (1963, under the pen-name D. Insor); and *Thailand: Society and Politics* (1981), together with numerous articles. He has also had a long association with the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore, and completed research for this publication while on a visiting fellowship there in 1993.

Girling's central concern is to explain the nature of development in Thailand, and in particular the contribution of capitalism and the middle class. He argues that this can be understood in terms of four "contradictions" (meaning that each is essentially autonomous, having a driving force of its own): the rise of business; the assertion and contestation of state (especially military) power; "money politics"; and the growth of civil society. Underlying these developments has been an economic boom, interspersed with occasional busts, commencing with the rule of Prime Minister Sarit in the 1950s.

Girling's four contradictions correspond, more or less, to four specific groups: the modern business sector, the military, the rural power élite (the notorious *jao pho*, or godfathers), and civil society. The author describes how the military was dominant until 1973 when students (civil society), in alliance with business, overthrew the old order. Thereafter, military interventions would not go uncontested — the coup of February 1991 was something of an anomaly, but the military got away with it because government corruption had become blatant, and it promised an early return of power. From the 1970s, businessmen, both urban and rural, began playing an active role in parliament and Cabinets. Formerly a pariah group, they now felt strong enough to stand on their own. The 1980s, under Prime Minister General Prem Tinsulanonda, saw a coalition of the military, technocrats and business groups. Chatichai's government in the late 1980s reflected the dominance of the business class, particularly the rural type. In the turbulent politics of the 1990s, civil society once more reasserted itself in May 1992 with mass opposition to the military-dominated Suchinda government. Since then, no one group has been able to dominate, though each has remained strong enough to protect its own territory, and occasionally threaten others.

The two business groups and civil society together represent the middle class and, in combination assert "hegemony" over the rest of society. Girling then demonstrates at considerable length that the emergence of a middle class does not — as some theorists argue — inevitably lead to real democracy. It can, indeed, lead to an increase in money politics — trading wealth for power by buying votes or politicians. And it can lead to the politics of self-interest, in which the needs of the poor and the environment are ignored. Ironically, greater democracy sometimes worked against the interests of the poor, who in the 1990s were better protected by the appointed governments of Anand Panyarachun than by predatory elected governments. Democracy was subverted by the "drag" of an under-educated rural sector, which voted into office — in return for bribes — the rural business élite and their allies, whose interests were so opposed to theirs.

Much has been written about the dark side of Thai politics in this account. Does this confirm the view of those who argue that the recent economic fall was caused by political self-interest? Partly, yes. But Girling's analysis is also a caution against simplistic conclusions. His account shows that democracy *per se* is no panacea. Conversely, the much-maligned business sector was not totally corrupt and motivated by self-interest. Businessman Anand, twice appointed Prime Minister between 1991 and 1992, had a remarkable reforming record "marked by bold decisions on important projects, greater 'transparency' intended to

combat corruption and reduce monopolistic tendencies, and an effective 'poll watch' scrutiny of elections" (p. 79). While this group did not have the upper hand from the mid-1990s, they were still a significant force, allied with technocrats in the bureaucracy.

Girling's work provides a helpful synthesis of the major writings on Thai political economy during the past decade or so. It has copious footnotes, but sorely lacks a bibliography to help illuminate the way through them. The book is not an introductory text, nor is it intended for the general reader. Its target audience is the advanced student of either Thai politics or the comparative politics of newly-industrializing countries.

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***Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness.* By Milton Osborne.** NSW, Australia: Allen & Unwin Pty Ltd., 1994. 283 pp.

Cambodia's monarch-turned political leader, Norodom Sihanouk, has been viewed by Cambodia historian David Chandler as "one of Asia's most flamboyant and enduring figures". This assertion makes Milton Osborne's book under review worth reading, partly because of Cambodia's endless tragedies in the last few decades and partly because the Prince has outlived many of his enemies. The leading figures such as former Defence Minister Lon Nol and Prince Sisowath Sirik Matak (Sihanouk's cousin), who had put him out of power in a *coup d'etat* in March 1970, have long been dead. The Khmer Rouge leadership, whom Sihanouk had helped fight its way to power in 1975, has been internationally isolated and has now disintegrated. But Sihanouk was reinstated as King in September 1993, and still reigns. Although the book does not focus on Sihanouk's re-emerging role in Cambodian society, the author provides a critical but helpful look at the monarch's early personal and political life.

Some of Osborne's critics may feel uncomfortable with his approach: the author presents a critical, unauthorized biography of the Cambodian Prince, but did not seek the latter's assistance in view of the fact that doing so could jeopardize his ability to write "in the frank terms" that he did. One could, therefore, point out that by not having conducted personal interviews with Sihanouk, the author did not listen to the Prince's side of the story and did not give him a fair