

Regardless of these questions, this is an important work that will benefit social scientists working on Southeast Asia.

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***Thaksin: The Business of Politics in Thailand.* By Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker.** Chiangmai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2004. Softcover: 301pp.

Having had the misfortune of more than several dozen governments since the abolition of its absolute monarchy in December 1932, Thailand was for a long time seen as politically bumbling though economically stellar middle-income Southeast Asian nations, thus obscuring the significance of its current prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, to much of the rest of the world. It is fair to say that today Thaksin and his policies loom large over much of Southeast Asia's political and economic landscape largely as a result of his iron-fisted determination to mould Thai society with his mixture of populist policies and soft authoritarianism, while methodically fighting off any mild and harsh criticism from internal and as well as external critics. That his government has delivered rapid growth as well as political stability at home since he came to power seems to have blunted much of that criticism even though many of his critics are unwavering.

Has Thaksin's leadership played a significant role in catalysing intentional historical transformation in Thai institutions and social groups? Is his leadership a distinctive form of social influence insofar as he, Thaksin, affects the intrinsic and not just the extrinsic motivation of his followers? Are there other criteria, other than effectiveness, according to which Thaksin's leadership can be evaluated? These are the sort of issues around which more rigorous and more academic treatments of leadership are most often built. However, such an academically more in-depth biography is not what the authors have provided in what is without doubt a book intentionally targeted for a much wider mass-market audience.

Instead, in their newest book, Pasuk and Baker offer a very user-friendly and brilliant exegesis of the Thaksin phenomenon. Pasuk, who teaches economics at Chulalongkorn University, and Baker, who is an independent writer based in Bangkok, are also the co-authors of *Thailand: Economy and Politics, Thailand's Boom and Bust*, and

Thailand's Crisis. Here they do readers a service in pointing out that the Thaksin phenomenon is not only unprecedented but may also be a threat to Thailand's democratic consolidation. Apart from the preamble devoted to the indictment of Thaksin by the country's counter-corruption commission for filing false financial statements in December 2000 and his subsequent acquittal by the courts in January 2001, *Thaksin: The Business of Politics in Thailand* proceeds chronologically from Thaksin's early years till his rise to the premiership of Thailand — which, barring any major catastrophe or scandal, is set to continue for the foreseeable future.

As the authors convincingly demonstrate, it was the combination of the Asian financial crisis that started in 1997, Thaksin's revolutionary rethinking of the staid politics in the aftermath of that crisis, and his party's deft marketing skills of promises of restored pride and a better future for much of the Thai populace which laid the base for his political trajectory. Most brilliant are four of the book's nine chapters: Chapter Two, "Family and Business", not only chronicles Thaksin's formative years as a son of successful Chinese immigrants in the northern Thai province of Chiangmai, but also his shadowy beginnings in the computer leasing business as well as his leap into telecommunications and television through which he amassed one of the largest fortunes in Thailand. Chapter Three, "Political Rise", traces Thaksin's initial dabbling in politics in the mid-1990s before going on to launch his own political party, Thai Rak Thai (TRT), in 1998 and subsequently winning the general election of January 2001 following a cleverly-run campaign in which he accused former Thai Prime Minister Chuan Leepkai of running a grossly ineffectual government. The TRT then rapidly consolidated its power by absorbing several opposition parties, thus cementing its unassailable hold on the House of Representatives. That, in turn, gave the party the ability to legislate virtually unopposed while guaranteeing both political stability and policy continuity for the remainder of the prime minister's term. Chapter Four, "Thaksinomics", details Thaksin's canny brand of populist socio-economics led by robust private consumption and bolstered by loose monetary and fiscal conditions which, even in the face of heavy criticism from his critics, have seen the Thai economy rebound strongly from the historic lows following the 1997 economic crisis. Lastly, Chapter five, "Managing Society", lays bare Thaksin's political and theoretical underpinnings of what comes off as a not-so-subtle form of authoritarianism. The authors suggest that whether it is his ordering that the streets of Bangkok be scrubbed, new trees planted, and tens of thousands of homeless people, beggars, undocumented aliens, prostitutes and stray dogs run out of town

before hosting world leaders, or whether it is the harassment of various local and international human-rights and social activists in ways more reminiscent of past military-led governments, Thaksin has proven himself an iconoclast. His much-touted “war on drugs” during which several thousand people lost their lives as well as his brazen offer of diplomatic support for the Burmese junta while cracking down hard on Burmese refugees and migrants in Thailand, are highlighted as showing Thaksin’s contempt for the sorts of rights many of his countryfolk had come to take for granted following the 1997 reformist constitution.

Pasuk and Baker’s *Thaksin* allows us to come closer than ever before to an appreciation of the still unfolding life and actions of the man and of the political world and society within which he has long operated. With skill and clarity, drawing on a wide range of sources, their biography paints a picture of success and failure, yet one tempered with an understanding of Thaksin as being fundamentally a Thai politician not so different from many of his contemporaries or predecessors. The portrait also reveals the authors’ appreciation of the complex ingredients of the political legacy whose foundation Thaksin is currently laying — a legacy that will surely influence Thai politics for many years.

In the end, Thaksin comes off as a bold, uncompromising and highly skilled politician whose well-oiled magnetism and charisma have up until now unified a fractious nation under his TRT party, but whose unabashed flirtation with soft authoritarianism risks wrecking, or at least slowing, Thailand’s democratic consolidation.

It is unfortunate however that the book does not examine in any great detail Thaksin’s foreign policy particularly with regard to Indochina. If all goes according to plan, Thaksin’s so-called Economic Cooperation Strategy (ECS) trade zone that Thailand persuaded Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos to form in late 2003 will solidify Thailand as the pre-eminent political power in peninsular Southeast Asia. In fact, the ECS combined with other manoeuvres on the international scene under Thaksin’s administration, can be seen as yet another step in Thailand’s ambitions to become the leading power in Southeast Asia under the TRT. That story as well as other aspects of Thaksin’s trade and economics-dominated regional policy, is a major departure for the Thailand of recent decades, and one whose consequences are potentially quite profound and, as a result, need to be chronicled.

However, this is a minor quibble about what is essentially the first full-length English language examination of the Thaksin phenomenon. In all, Pasuk and Baker’s book offers a succinct explanation of a man who continues to be in the forefront of a new type of politics in

contemporary Thailand, and about whom many other Thai observers will no doubt write.

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***Researching Indonesia: A Guide to Political Analysis.* By Gerald L. Houseman.** Lewiston, New York, USA: The Edward Mellen Press, 2004. Hardcover: 186pp.

If the current U.S. malaise in the Middle East represents in one sense the inability of policymakers to go beyond their ethnocentric worldview since September 11, 2001 then in another sense another abiding concern is whether U.S. foreign policy prescriptions in the future will be imaginative enough to secure its interests as well make the world a safer place. With U.S. interests so wide in scope and its interactions in an ever changing world so complex, will the next generation of foreign policy advisors be equipped adequately to provide sound advice to future administrations? The empirical evidence is worrying. Area studies pre-September 11 had collapsed significantly since the 1980s and these worrying trends have accelerated since the end of the Cold War. Indeed, in view of the apparent inability of U.S. policymakers to comprehend the complex world around them, if ever a Senate inquiry was convened to assess the U.S. responses post-September 11, an urgent recommendation should be that Area Studies be designated a strategic national priority.

Take for example Indonesian studies. Would a current academic audit discover that Indonesian language courses at U.S. universities are gravely endangered because of plummeting enrolments? Could America's advanced linguistic skills base in Bahasa Indonesia be lost within the next 10 years? Is there a possibility that the U.S., once a world leader in the teaching of Indonesian language and studies, producing many of the key scholars in the field, allow the progressive decline of a field once so rich in diverse scholarly perspectives? Such diverse research ranged from the policy-related work of Pauker at Rand and Glassburner at Berkeley, the powerful historical analysis of Benda at Yale, Geertz's remarkable contributions to anthropology at Princeton, and of course the eclectic group of mavericks led by Kahin at Cornell. It takes close to 10 years for a scholar to build the advanced linguistic capability and