

***The Thaksinization of Thailand. By Duncan McCargo and Ukrist Pathmanand. Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2005. Softcover: 277pp.***

Never has a Thai leader generated so much academic interest in so short a time. Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's rise to power in January 2001 and his prolonged rule since have been so phenomenal and unrivalled in Thai political annals that they have spawned a burgeoning sub-field in the study of Thai politics that can be dubbed "Thaksinology", underpinned by all kinds of books and articles focusing on Thaksin and all facets of his personal and professional life. The volume under review is the latest English-language investigation of the telecommunications billionaire in the seat of power. It is a team effort between the most prolific Western analyst of Thai politics and an indigenous researcher who is fast coming into his own. Coming out within a year of Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker's incisive and insightful *Thaksin: The Business of Politics in Thailand*, McCargo and Ukrist had a tough act to follow. Yet *The Thaksinization of Thailand* does not disappoint, notwithstanding a handful of empirical kinks and analytical shortcomings.

For critics of Thaksin's virtual authoritarian rule and pandering populist policies, this book offers intellectual therapy and sheer indulgence. Unlike Pasuk and Baker, McCargo and Ukrist make no pretence of non-partisanship. They pull no punches from the outset, opening with a salvo in the first chapter that "... Thaksin is an opportunistic politician, for whom ideas are simply a means to an end. He is not animated by the pursuit of ideas, but by the pursuit of wealth and power. Thaksin's greatest achievement is the creation of a formidable political and economic power network, the mother of all *phuak*" (original italics), in reference to the Thai leader's nexus of factions (p. 20). In the last paragraph of the book, the authors depart with all guns blazing. The penultimate conclusion leaves little doubt: "Thaksin Shinawatra is not an ideas man. He is a brilliantly successful opportunist" (p. 252). In between, the crux of the book takes Thaksin to task on his conflict of interest in the telecoms sector, shrewd concoction of the ruling Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party, re-politicization of the military, manipulative political discourse, and personal networks that have reshaped Thailand's political economy.

The book is primarily divided along the two authors' complementary areas of strength. McCargo traces Thaksin's rise in chapter 1, tackles the TRT party in chapter 3, and scrutinizes the prime minister's discourse in chapter 5. In turn, Ukrist's even-

numbered chapters cover the politics of telecoms, the military, and new political economy networks.

Of particular interest is McCargo's treatment of the TRT, which follows his earlier work on Thai political parties. To the author, the TRT is not a genuine political party in the lenses of democracy theorists. Its 10 million-odd members from the rural masses and its concrete policy platform are illusory. Thaksin's Bangkok-based "electoral professionals" exploit marketing techniques to win grassroots votes, and ultimately rely on rural patronage networks to rule. At issue in this chapter is the long-standing debate about parties and factions in Thai politics. McCargo maintains that rural-based factions still lord over the TRT.

However, the author might have paid attention to trends. Over his four years in power, Thaksin has gradually created a new numbers game emphasizing a "maximum-winning" coalition strategy, absorbing smaller parties, monopolizing the party scene and bringing as many MPs as possible into the coalition government. Armed with a critical mass of support bases revolving around his sister's northern camp, the Bangkok wing, and his handpicked MPs on the party list, the overwhelming parliamentary majority insulates Thaksin against unruly factions. As long as he can withstand the threat of and actual factional defections, Thaksin can maintain overall control of the TRT's various factions. McCargo also could have paid more attention to the 1997 constitution and its stipulations that have shifted significant authority from the legislature (e.g. party factions) to the executive for the ostensible benefit of stability and effectiveness (e.g. MP candidates must be registered with a party for at least 90 days to contest the election, coupled with the prime minister's house dissolution authority with a snap election to take place within 60 days). The recent and ongoing transformation of the fiscal policy regime also merits scrutiny as it allows Thaksin to appease and accommodate key factions through government largesse. In the end, McCargo's argument that the factions emanating from rural patronage networks still dominate the party may hold true, but the TRT is increasingly imposing itself over its factions. Although this trend may be ephemeral, it is an unprecedented phenomenon that bears scrutiny.

Among Ukrist's contributions, chapter 2 stands out. It is well documented, rich in empirical detail, although much of the data from the stock market's disclosure requirements (i.e. Form 56-1) could have been analysed and integrated in more depth. Nevertheless, the background on the major telecoms players is a useful reference for future political economy research, and the weight of data on Thaksin's conflicts of interest is persuasive. Perhaps the most interesting section

is on the Shinawatra conglomerate's corporate interests abroad and Thaksin's foreign policy forays. As Shinawatra's vested interests and Thailand's foreign policy objectives have overlapped, one faces difficulty gauging whether Thaksin ventures abroad for the profit of his family's businesses or for the benefit of Thailand.

Ukrist's chapter on the military does not fit in well with the overall structure of the book. The author's argument that Thaksin has re-politicized the military is substantiated by detailed accounts of Thaksin's military preparatory school classmates, their rapid career mobility and prominent roles. In fact, it could be argued that Thaksin intended only to tame the military, to keep the generals on a leash and avoid putsches that upended previous governments, especially Chatichai Choonhavan's in 1991. The police, in fact, may have been the force that has been re-politicized. Not since the 1950s has the police force been so involved in policy formulation and implementation. Given his police officer background, Thaksin has deftly deployed trusted police generals to carry out his policies, such as the wars on drugs and dark influences. Thaksin has even given out awards for superior police performance, somewhat akin to the *aswin* (knight) rings dished out by Police General Phao Sriyanond to his favourite police officers during 1947–57, when the political power of the police was at its zenith. The men in khaki, rather than the military, could have been dealt a stand-alone chapter.

Book-length expositions are prone to minor factual inaccuracies. That "only party-list MPs could become ministers (p. 12)" is incorrect. Prommin Lertsuridej did not serve as finance minister (p. 95), although he held a stint as energy minister. The authors may have dwelt excessively on personalities in their emphasis on personal networks, whereas interests, coalitions, and the post-1997 structure of Thai politics could have figured more prominently in the explanatory framework. In developing countries, networks of personalities (e.g. who's who and who knows whom) are conceptually significant almost by definition, but what motivates such networks to coalesce, how they operate, and to what ends, hold the key to understanding them. Finally, the thrust of the book may have overstated the argument that Thaksin is bereft of real ideas, driven purely by naked and calculating opportunism. Thaksin's economic policy platform, popularly known as "Thaksinomics", was glaringly absent from the book. So are Thaksin's ideas about industrial upgrading and competitiveness-boosting cluster projects focusing on niche industries for future growth. After all, this is a prime minister who has recommended more than a hundred faddish books to his cabinet, a preacher who is at ease giving long management sermons without prepared texts to his subordinates and sycophants.

At issue may not be whether Thaksin is devoid of ideas, but whether his ideas bode well or ill for Thailand and to what ends and to whose benefit they serve. This book thickens the plot of Thai studies, its narrative fluid and lively. It should be required reading for anyone who wants to grasp what Thaksin is all about and where Thailand is headed under his watch.

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***Regionalism and Multilateralism: Essays on Cooperative Security in the Asia-Pacific.* By Amitav Acharya. Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2003. Softcover: 391pp.**

The end of the Cold War had different effects on East Asia and Europe. This historic event led to the termination of the division of Europe along ideological lines and paved the way for the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to the eastern part of the continent. It also resulted in the deepening of the European Union (EU) as the member states decided to change the regional grouping from a single market to an economic union. They also agreed to widen the EU's membership as virtually all European states west of Russia were invited to join the organization. The end of the Cold War transformed Europe from the realm of Mars to a domain of Venus largely because this event brought about a fundamental and systemic transformation of regional politics based on realism and the balance of terror to a new regime founded on the principles of liberalism and multilateralism.

This has not been the case in East Asia. The collapse of the Soviet Union removed the major strategic rationale that held the United States, Japan and China together in an informal entente. It also removed the lid over a number of local conflicts such as those in the Korean peninsula and the Taiwan Strait. Consequently, the immediate post-1991 period was marked by the emergence of new apprehensions, and inter-state rivalries and tensions due to the uncertainty about the future positions, interests, and relations between China, Japan, the United States and India. The rapid growth of its economy and the removal of the Soviet conventional military threat from its northern border have enabled