

# **The Continual Breakdown of Democracy in Thailand:**

A Case Study on the Role of Elite Competition, Modernization and Political Institutions in the  
Democratization Process of Thailand

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## Abstract

In this thesis, I will perform an in-depth empirical analysis of Thai political history in an attempt to understand why democracy has failed to consolidate since the 1932 revolution that ended the absolute monarchy. To help disentangle Thailand's complex democratization process, I engage three salient strands of democratization literature, which I refer to as *elite theories*, *political institutionalist theories*, and *modernization theories*. Elite theories propose that political stability is dependent on the unity or disunity of competing elite groups. Political Institutionalists point to the importance of democratic regime type, stating that parliamentary democracies are more likely to stabilize due to certain secondary mechanisms, such as mutual dependence between the legislative and executive bodies, and more proportional representation across political parties to avoid polarization. The modernization theories that I employ in my analysis propose that modernization stabilizes democracy because it increases access to key resources and consequently, empowers lower and middle classes to have political voice.

My analysis relies on theory-guided process tracing – with important historical events serving as my primary data. I focus my empirical chapters specifically on the historical events leading to the democratic consolidation of the 1990s and the democratic breakdown of 2006, creating two temporal case studies within Thailand's complex political history. Other data that I employ include election results and socio-economic growth data. I have chosen to revolve my process tracing around the primary and secondary mechanisms of the mentioned democratization literature strands. By tracing these mechanisms within the context of Thai history, I not only develop a clear causal chain that explains Thailand's various democratic breakdowns, but I also assess the strengths of the theories that I engage.

I conclude that elite theories are exceedingly relevant in determining political stability in the case of Thailand even in the face of modernization and the political empowerment of lower classes. I also conclude that secondary political institutionalist mechanisms associated with political instability played a direct and important role in the democratic breakdown of 2006; however, the existence of these secondary mechanisms even in a parliamentary democracy suggests that more research could be done to improve the nuances of why and how democratic breakdown can still occur regardless of democratic regime type. Modernization mechanisms played an even more complex role in Thailand's political history, aiding in both the democratic consolidation of the 1990s and democratic breakdown of 2006: modernization empowered the political voice of both the middle class and rural poor; however, due to polarizing populist policies and underlying socio-economic divides, political empowerment of these new voices effectively caused deep political polarization, which ultimately tore the country apart. As a result of these mixed outcomes of modernization mechanisms on democratic consolidation, I suggest that further research should be done to disentangle the exact role of modernization and political empowerment in consolidating democracy in the light of Thailand's deep socio-economic class divides.

**Key Words:** Thailand, democratization, democratic breakdown, political polarization, political institutions, modernization, socioeconomic class, elite competition, political voice

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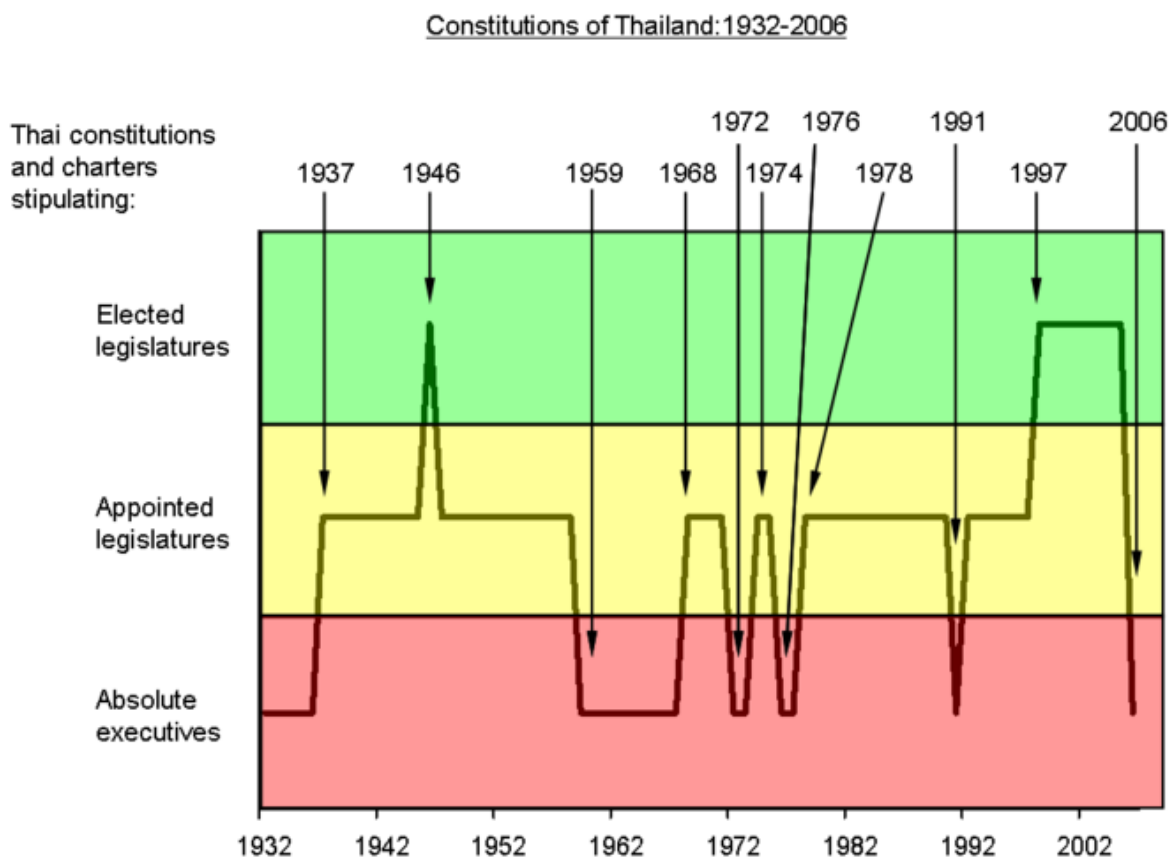
## **Introduction: The Continual Breakdown of Democracy in Thailand**

There has been a great deal of published literature that attempts to disentangle why democratic regimes in Latin America and Eastern Europe have either broken down or stabilized. These countries have been categorized by popular literature as part of the “Third Wave of Democracy” (Huntington 1991). But do the purported explanations for the breakdown of democracy in these “Third Wave” countries also apply to other democratizing countries? When democracy breaks down elsewhere, can these same theoretical frameworks provide the keys to understanding why these lapses back into authoritarianism occurred?

In my thesis, I will explore how some of these classic democratization theories can be used to understand the repeated breakdowns of democracy in Thailand. My primary question is: Why has Thailand repeatedly or time-after-time failed to establish stable democratic regimes despite repeated attempts to do so for the past 80 years? Specifically, I will explore how economic, institutional and social mechanisms interact to cause Thailand’s democratic regimes to break down instead of consolidating liberal democracy.

Since the political reforms of 1932, which ended the absolutist monarchy, Thailand has repeatedly tried to establish a stable democratic political system; however, political institutions have continually failed, leading to 17 separate constitutions and charters. Figure 1 illustrates these fluctuating cycles of democratic consolidation and breakdown. Although most of this period was wrought with military dominance over politics, in 1997 a constitution was drafted such that stable democratization finally seemed possible. After a series of violent civil protests,

the military had finally decided to remove itself from politics and a democracy respecting human rights was established. However, in 2006, less than 10 years after the 1997 constitution, civil political protests disrupted the country to the point that the military was called to intervene by the king of Thailand. I will pay particular attention to this time period, beginning with the civil protests in 1992, which ended military meddling in politics, up to the recent democratic breakdown in 2006. I will focus on this recent period because it demonstrates that the breakdown of democratic regimes in Thailand is not simply due to military interference, but rather it stems from deeper conflicts between socio-economic classes and the failure of political institutions to address these conflicts.



**Figure 1: Constitutions of Thailand (1932-2006), by balance of power between legislature and executive.**  
 Source: Patiwat Panurach. (Retrieved from [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a3/Evolution\\_of\\_Thai\\_constitutions\\_1932-2006\\_not\\_bold.png](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a3/Evolution_of_Thai_constitutions_1932-2006_not_bold.png))

To aid in understanding the puzzle of repeated failures of democratic consolidation in Thailand, I will engage in three strands of literature that seek to explain democratic breakdown through three distinct perspectives: political institutions, elite group competition, and economic development. Some scholars believe that the type of democratic regime established will influence the regime's stability, while others believe that cooperation between elite groups will influence regime stability. A third group points out the correlation between economic development and democracy, citing that certain social values (ones necessary for stable democracies) are usually found in economically developed countries. The more detailed mechanisms behind these theories will be discussed in the literature review and then will be used to disentangle the case of Thailand. Key terms will be defined as they are presented at the end of this introductory chapter.

My thesis is meant to provide a basic test of these theoretical mechanisms. It is not meant to be an in-depth analysis of each individual mechanism, but rather a survey of a number of mechanisms. I will assess which of these democratization theories appear to work and which ones do not, based on available data and historical facts. I will then draw conclusions about exactly how these mechanisms played a role in Thailand's various moments of consolidation and breakdown. I will also make suggestions on how future research can provide a more in-depth analysis of the mechanisms and processes that cause repeated democratic regime breakdown in Thailand.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will provide a brief survey of the theoretical mechanisms that I examine in this thesis. I then discuss the methodology of my thesis, in which I explain in more depth the significance of this case study, the analytical model that I used, and

the data I examined. I also provide a summary of the structure of my thesis and conclude the chapter with a list of key terms.

### *Literature Review*

The three literature strands that I will examine are conceptualized as follows:

#### Political Institutionalists

When attempting to understand the breakdown of democratic regimes, political institutions must be examined. Among the scholars that focus on political institutions and democratization, many believe that the type of democratic institution established at the beginning of a political regime will influence the stability of that regime. More specifically, the key mechanisms as identified by these scholars revolve around the differentiation between parliamentary and presidential democracies (Linz 1990, Stepan & Skach 1993). Given the appropriate secondary causal variables, these scholars claim that parliamentary-based democracies are more likely to consolidate and stabilize, while presidential-based democracies are more likely to breakdown (Linz 1990, Stepan & Skach 1993).

Within this strand of literature, there is some divergence about what secondary causal variables make parliamentary democracies more stable and presidential democracies more likely to break down. Stepan & Skach suggest that parliamentary democracies are more likely to stabilize because they encourage cooperative “mutual dependence” between a political majority and the prime minister (Stepan and Skach 1993). Parliamentary systems contain decision mechanisms that are “deadlock-breaking devices,” such as the chief executive’s right to dissolve parliament and the legislature’s right to remove the chief executive via a no-confidence vote.

These parliamentary mechanisms provide a legitimate means to address political crises before they lead to extreme regime instability, while presidential systems lacking in these mechanisms can give way to escalating impasses between the independently functioning chief executive and legislature (Stepan and Skach 1993). On the other hand, Linz and Valenzuela point to the rigidity of presidential democracies in creating polarization between political groups. Presidential elections and the fixed term of the presidential office create “winner-take-all” systems that champion only one political party. This in turn intensifies polarization between political parties (Linz 1990). Valenzuela’s analysis of the breakdown of democracy in Chile illustrates these mechanisms by demonstrating how presidential elections eventually polarized political groups, thereby dismantling a “pragmatic Center coalition” and ultimately leading to regime breakdown (Valenzuela 1978). Parliamentary governments, on the other hand, offer mechanisms to create more “disciplined” political parties by allowing a number of parties to continue having representation, thereby avoiding polarization.

While these theories are valuable in providing a framework to analyze political breakdowns in Latin America as contrasted to the democratic stability in Eastern Europe, the question of their universal applicability arises when examining the case of Thailand. In particular, the hypothesis that parliamentary democracies are more likely to promote democratic consolidation fails to predict the outcome of the case of Thailand: despite its parliamentary political institutions, they have continued to suffer a number of democratic regime breakdowns. More broadly, the case of Thailand demonstrates that this literature fails to give a full picture of how institutions affect democratic consolidation or breakdown. It does not provide an in-depth analysis of how different types of parliamentary or presidential institutions can interact negatively or positively with a country’s socio-economic context. The different configurations

and stratifications between socio-economic classes may complicate the success or failure of a parliamentary democratic system. Within this literature, it is unclear how elite groups and other socio-economic classes can interact with one another to ultimately create polarizing political groups even within a parliamentary democracy.

### Elite Theorists

Some scholars have suggested that the stability of a political regime is dependent on the convergence of the elite classes. O'Donnell & Schmitter have suggested that the presence of "elite pacts" may enhance the probability of democratic regime stability. They define these pacts as an "agreement among a select set of actors which seeks to define (or better, to redefine) rules governing the exercise of power on the basis of mutual guarantees for the 'vital interest' of those entering into it" (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986, 37). By creating these mutual guarantees, elites have less of an incentive to reform government in their interests, minimizing internal conflict between elite groups and political instability.

Higley & Burton take the theory one step further to argue that a dis-unified national elite will generally produce unstable regimes that continue to breakdown and reform, while a unified national elite will produce a stable regime that may eventually evolve into a democracy (Higley and Burton 1989). They define these national elite groups as any actor who has decision-making power through military, political, cultural, socio-economic or communicative resources. They contend that national elite disunity and regime instability will persist unless the elite can transform and unify into "elite settlements." Without this convergence, elites will most likely continue to reform political regimes in hopes of seizing power for their own interest (Higley and Burton 1989). Higley & Pakulski elaborate by identifying key mechanisms that assure "unity in

diversity” amongst elites. They include: a common elite commitment to democratic institutions, restrained elite partisanship and reciprocal recognition of elites by other elites (Higley and Pakulski 2000).

This literature can offer some insight as to how different national elite groups can interact to stabilize or breakdown democracy in Thailand, since Thailand has a variety of competing elite groups. However, this literature does not address what happens when the elite groups themselves change and lose power. Because many of these elite convergence and divergence theories have mainly been applied to Western countries, it is unclear how these theories will play out in developing countries whose economic growth can impact traditional social class structures (Huntington, 1968). These elite-focused theories do not explicitly describe how these disruptions caused by modernization can in turn reshape power structures and ultimately, how they can affect democracy consolidation and breakdown.

### Modernization Theorists

Other scholars have identified and discussed the correlation between development and democracy as a key relationship to consider. Some scholars, such as Lipset, argue that democracies tend to be more stable in countries with higher per capita income levels because there is less intense distributional conflict. In other words, economic development increases economic and social security for lower classes by increasing income and education. This security makes them less receptive to the extremist ideologies and exploitative political agendas put forth by elite classes, which in turn prevents political polarization and the breakdown of political regimes (Lipset, 1959).

Dahl also suggests a similar relationship, saying, “As countries with hegemonic systems move to high levels of economic development... a centrally dominated social order is increasingly difficult to maintain. For if our argument is correct, economic development itself generates the conditions of a pluralistic social order” (Dahl 1971, 78). This new diverse social order in turn demands for a more competitive and open political system to express the newfound political voice of the lower classes, i.e. a democracy. Specific conditions under socio-economic development include the provision of literacy, education, communication, the creation of a pluralistic social order and the prevention of inequality (Dahl 1971).

Przeworski, et. all provide statistical data that demonstrated the existence of a significant relationship between economic development and democratic consolidation. Through large-N statistical analysis, Przeworski et. all illustrated that increases in economic development are usually accompanied by democratic regime stability (Przeworski, et. all 1996). Przeworski, et. all claim that countries with annual per-capita incomes under \$1,000 have a 0.12 probability of breakdown, meaning a democracy in one of these poor countries is expected to last an average of eight years. Along the same lines, democracies in countries are expected to last 16 years with incomes between \$1,000 and \$2,000, 33 years with incomes between \$2,000 and \$4,000, and 100 years with incomes between \$4,000 and \$6,000 (Przeworski, et. all 1996, 41).<sup>1</sup> For example, when Germany first democratized in 1919, they had a GDP per capita of \$1,072 (Przeworski, et. all 1997: 173). According to Przeworski’s findings, we expect that the democratic regime would breakdown within 16 years. Germany’s democratic regime did in fact breakdown 14 years later in 1933.

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<sup>1</sup> These figures are expressed in purchasing power parity (PPP) U.S. dollars in 1985 international prices. I will account for this later in my thesis when comparing Thailand’s correlation between democratic regime breakdown and economic development



Although this study clearly demonstrates a real correlation, there has been much scholarly debate as to whether or not democracy causes economic growth or if economic growth causes stable democracies. For the purposes of this thesis, I will be examining those theories such as Lipset's and Dahl's, which claim that economic development is a factor in democracy stability.

These theories will be useful in examining democratization in developing countries, such as Thailand, because they offer a perspective on how economic growth can influence democratic regime stability by empowering its lower class citizens. While this literature provides a useful framework to examine how individuals can gain a political voice, it does not discuss the complexities of the relationship between popular political voice and political party agendas and polarization. Modernization theories are limited in that they merely point out the potential for socio-economic development to combat political polarization. In reality, voters can still be captured and exploited by political parties even if they have more social and economic resources available to them, suggesting that the mechanisms are more complex than modernization theory proponents describe. This complexity is illustrated by the case of Thailand: although the country has modernized and developed economically to a significant degree, democracy and legitimate representation continue to elude its citizens. This indicates that the increased availability of social and economic resources was not enough to prevent democratic regime breakdown.

### Conclusion from the Literature

These three literature strands offer important causal mechanisms that could potentially explain the repeated breakdowns of democratic regimes in Thailand. Although they have classically been used to explain breakdown or consolidation in countries that were part of the

third wave of democratization, their application to the case of Thailand will offer some insight as to why Thailand's democratic regimes have continued to fail. Furthermore, after applying these theories to Thailand, I will assess the soundness of these theories and will then make suggestions as to how these literature strands can develop more nuanced ideas to account for other unique cases.

### *Methodology*

#### Case selection

My thesis focuses primarily on the latest breakdown in 2006. I have chosen this particular breakdown as the center of my thesis, because it is a unique turning point in Thai history for a number of reasons. First, the breakdown ended Thailand's longest surviving democratic regime. Second, the breakdown came after the country had experienced a peaceful transfer of power from one party to another during fair elections in 2001, which supposedly demonstrated the legitimacy of the established democratic regime. Third, Thailand had experienced several years of solid economic development and growth, which should have also reinforced the government's legitimacy. Because of this unique situation, this particular breakdown demonstrates that Thailand's inability to establish stable democracies is not just the result of military control and influence, but rather a more complex set of mechanisms that relate to elite structures, class structures and heightened political polarization.

More specifically, my thesis will contrast the events leading to the establishment of the 1997 constitution against the period leading to the 2006 breakdown. These two time periods represent two different political climates in Thailand. The 1997 constitution, popularly referred to as "the People's Constitution," represents the beginnings of legitimate democratic

consolidation in Thailand. It gained widespread support and legitimacy and was viewed as a successful step towards democratic development and increased stability. This sharply contrasts with the 2006 regime breakdown, which occurred less than a decade later. By examining these time periods separately, I have created two temporal case studies for my thesis. I will use these two case studies to assess the duality of the proposed mechanisms of the literature strands I am examining with my thesis: In other words, I will test how these mechanisms either succeed or fail in stabilizing democracy in Thailand.

### Analytical Model

My research is centered around a careful, detail-oriented examination of Thailand's history. In my thesis, I examine Thailand's repeated breakdowns and consolidations through "theory-guided process tracing."

The method of theory-guided process tracing relates historical narratives and events with theoretical explanations. As sociologist Aminzade (1993: 108) describes, the researcher must provide "theoretically explicit narratives that carefully trace and compare the sequences of events constituting a process" of interest. He continues to explain that narratives "allow us to capture the unfolding of social action over time in a manner sensitive to the order in which events occur" (Aminzade 1993: 108). The method is useful in testing competing hypotheses and proposed mechanisms, as it seeks to explicitly specify the linking causes and effects of a process.

With theory-guided process tracing, I will attempt to identify the key events, processes, actors and decisions that link the cycles of democracy in Thailand with the proposed mechanisms of popular democratization literature. More specifically, I will compare and contrast the sequence of events leading to democratic consolidation around the 1997 constitution against the

sequence of events leading to the 2006 breakdown. By examining these two causal chains, I can assess which of the proposed mechanisms appear to fit in both the causal sequence that leads to consolidation and the sequence that leads to breakdown. I can then, use these results to assess how the hypothesized mechanisms played out in the case of Thailand.

Examples of process tracing and historical narrative analysis include Valenzuela's account of democratic regime breakdown in Chile and Ulfelder's account of breakdown in Fiji. In Valenzuela's analysis, he traces the process of political polarization in Chile, which he claims was the primary mechanism behind the military coup of 1973. In Ulfelder's analysis, he traces the interests of a variety of actors (including elites and opposing political parties) and ultimately proposes that due to a series of events Fiji's military leaders were finally motivated to end democracy in 2006 (Ulfelder 2010).

### Data

In addition to examining historical events as my primary data, I also examine the historical processes behind the proposed mechanisms of the three literature strands that I engage. I use this information to track the proposed mechanisms over time to determine their association with democratic regime breakdown.

When tracing mechanisms put forth by political institutionalists, I examine measures of the level of mutual dependence between a political legislative majority and the prime minister, as well as assessments of the amount of political party polarization over time. More specifically, I pay particular attention to moments in history that involve parliament dissolution and the questioning of a prime minister's legitimacy. To measure party polarization, I look at election

data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union Election Database<sup>2</sup>, which measures the number of seats won or lost by various political parties during each election year. I also examine news articles that describe political party disputes and polarization.

To examine mechanisms proposed by elite theories of disunity and unity, I rely on tracing the decisions and actions that key Thai elite groups have taken to determine if these actions indicate elite convergence or elite disunity.

When tracing mechanisms put forth by modernization theorists, I examine Thailand's income inequality levels to determine if their economic growth diffused enough to decrease distributional conflict between economic classes. I also track social development indicators over time, e.g. literacy rates, schooling rates, and the quality of civil liberties to determine if socio-economic development was capable of supplying all Thais with a political voice (as proposed by modernization theories). All of this data was collected from the World Bank.

The specific limitations to my research include my ability to properly trace mechanisms such as mutual dependency between the prime minister and parliament. I can only measure when there are outright public disputes between the prime minister and parliament – internal tensions and pressures between the prime minister and the parliament are harder to measure and capture. Measuring the political polarization of the Thai population over time is also difficult, since Thailand does not perform many public-opinion polls that clearly capture the general political climate. It is also difficult to accurately assess how unified or dis-unified elite groups are, since I am only able to assess this mechanism through events that are publicly known: outright disunity is clearer to capture than secretive pacts that occur between elite groups. My assessment of modernization theories is also limited, because even though the theories themselves are reliant on statistics, numbers do not capture the full story. Even if inequality rates

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<sup>2</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union data available at: [http://www.ipu.org/parline/reports/2311\\_arc.htm](http://www.ipu.org/parline/reports/2311_arc.htm)

are low and social development indicators are high, there is still an uncertainty as to how socio-economic groups are reacting to these perceived levels of development and whether or not they are reducing distributional conflicts.

### *Thesis Structure*

The thesis proceeds as follows:

The second chapter provides a background on Thailand's political history beginning with the revolution of 1932, which ended the absolute monarchy, up until the 1990s. The regime breakdowns that occurred during this period were characterized by military intervention that occurred only to reassert the military's dominance over other competing Thai elite groups. This military monopoly over Thai politics seems to provide the primary causal mechanism for the repeated democratic regime breakdowns in Thailand; however, as I describe in the following chapters, the most recent political regime changes reveal that there are more complex mechanisms at play. In other words, this chapter sets the stage for the rest of the thesis by providing an overview of Thailand's historical political climate.

The third chapter explores the mechanisms that led to the establishment of the 1997 constitution. An analysis of this period is necessary in understanding the breakdown of 2006, as it provides a strong counterpoint to Thailand's history of democratic regime breakdown: it was the first time that the military agreed to relinquish its role in politics and was considered by leaders of civil society, international and national academics and the general public to be a period of hopeful democratic consolidation. I focus on the rise of a new elite class consisting of big-business entrepreneurs; the growing importance of the middle class; the public protests against the military in 1992; and the creation of the 1997 constitution itself.

The fourth chapter traces the mechanisms that led to the 2006 breakdown. Events and processes that I pay particular attention to are Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's policies and the public's mixed reaction to them; the strengthening of the rural poor's political voice; Thaksin's antagonism of both the military and business elites; Thaksin's alienation of the middle class due to his corrupt practices; and the resulting political polarization.

The fifth and concluding chapter synthesizes how the theoretical mechanisms proposed by political institutionalists, elite theorists, and modernization theorists fit the case of Thailand. I find that during the democratic consolidation of the 1990s, elite disunity coupled with modernization mechanisms effectively brought political change to Thai politics; and that this change was solidified by an elite pact and a new constitution drafted by Thai civil society and the business elites. However, this new elite pact and Thailand's more modernized civil society were not enough to ensure political stability into the future. Democratic breakdown eventually occurred in 2006 as a direct result of political institutionalist mechanisms, such as political polarization and the distortion of Thailand's parliamentary institutions. I also find that elite disunity and modernization mechanisms played an indirect role in the breakdown by fueling the political polarization that ultimately tore the nation apart. After detailing these findings, I then make suggestions as to how all of these theories can be modified and further expanded through future research of the current political climate in Thailand. By examining the nuances that I identify for this future research, a more in-depth analysis of the mechanisms and processes that cause repeated democratic regime breakdown in Thailand can be brought to light.

## *Key Terms*

In my thesis, I have defined Democracy as:

A form of government that meets the following conditions:

- 1) Elected officials are in power, allowing citizens the power of representation.
- 2) Elections are fair and competitive, allowing citizens the ability to contest and choose.
- 3) Basic civil liberties are respected, allowing citizens freedoms and opportunities to deliberate and organize.
- 4) Politics is inclusive, expanding equal rights to all citizens.

\*These conditions are adapted from Robert Dahl's work (1971)

Democratic Regime Breakdown is defined as:

The dismantling of the legal institutions, freedoms and qualities that characterize a democratic regime, usually by force/violence.

Consolidation of Democratic Regimes is defined as:

The process of stabilizing democratic regimes, such that the likelihood of their continuation into the future is high.

Political Polarization has been adapted from Linz' discussion of *polarized pluralism* (Linz 1978,

26) to include:

- 1) Bilateral oppositions: counter oppositions that are, in constructive terms, incompatible



- 2) The presence of anti-system parties (which undermine the legitimacy of the regime)
- 3) The prevalence of centrifugal rather than centripetal drives in the electorate

\*This adaption is to simplify the idea of *polarized pluralism* to fit a more generalized term that captures the general process of cleavages that can occur between political parties that lead to decreasing moderate groups and increasing extremist groups

Pure Parliamentary Regimes and Pure Presidential Regimes is defined using Stepan & Skach's framework (Stepan and Skach 1993, 3-4):

*Pure Parliamentary Regime*: "a system of mutual dependence: (1) The chief executive power must be supported by a majority in the legislature and can fall if it receives a vote of no confidence. (2) The executive power (normally in conjunction with the head of state) has the capacity to dissolve the legislature and call for elections."

*Pure Presidential Regime*: "a system of mutual independence: (1) The legislative power has a fixed electoral mandate that is its own source of legitimacy. (2) The chief executive power has a fixed electoral mandate that is its own source of legitimacy."

National Elites include all actors who have the ability to influence decision-making through various resources. They are:

*Military Elites* include members of the military who hold leadership positions in either the military or the government

*Royalists* include members of the old aristocracy, and educated civilians who are not directly related to the royal family, but have strong familial legacies that once served the monarchy. Both the aristocracy and civilians remain loyal to traditional Thai hierarchies.

*Liberal Civilian Elites* include educated civilians who are not directly related to the royal family, but have strong familial legacies that once served the monarchy. They differ from royalists in that they no longer wish to remain loyal to traditional Thai hierarchies.

*Business Elites* include owners, shareholders and senior executives of large and medium companies.

Middle Class includes all actors who do not have direct decision-making power, but can influence politics through public action. They are academics, media people, students, NGO workers, professionals (doctors, engineers, architects, managers).

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### **Traditional Thai Politics: Military Dominance (1932-1980s)**

Since the revolution of 1932, Thailand has attempted to produce a cohesive government that incorporates both a constitutional monarchy and a parliamentary democracy. However, striking a balance between traditional and modern politics has proven to be quite difficult for Thailand. During this period prior to the economic boom of the 1980s, Thailand experienced over a dozen political regime changes. These changes in government were characterized by destabilizing competitions between different elite factions and a consequent military intervention that occurred to reassert stability (usually in the form of military control) over Thai politics. This process of elite competition and military dominance captures the essence of “traditional Thai politics.” Political order was essentially dominated by the military in partnership with a subservient second group of elites (usually the aristocracy) with a third party attempting, but ultimately failing to challenge the political order (e.g. liberal social elites and intellectuals).

This self-righteous military domination over Thai politics illustrates one aspect of Thailand’s continual struggle for democratic consolidation. However, after the economic boom of the 1980s, the recent political struggles of the 1990s and 2000s deviated from this traditional political paradigm: a new elite class of Thai businessmen and a prolific middle class would unite to form a coalition large enough to effectively challenge military and aristocratic rule. Although the dynamics of traditional Thai politics were not the only causal mechanisms present in the recent political crises, the history of elite competition and the will of the military are key factors in the majority of Thailand’s older democratic regime changes. As a result, they are important

historical legacies that must be examined in order to fully understand the complexity of the more recent political shifts of the 1990s and 2000s.

*Fall of the King and Elite Competition: 1932-1937*

The military first came into political power during the bloodless revolution of 1932, which transformed Thailand, then known as Siam<sup>3</sup>, from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy. The plans for the coup d'état originated in 1927 among a group of young Siamese revolutionaries in Paris, who were inspired by the European democracies that surrounded them. These men were a mixture of both military and aristocratic civilians.<sup>4</sup> The intellectual leader of the group, Pridi Banomyong, a law student who was educated in the French legal tradition saw the importance of subjecting the king's authority to the rule of law. They called themselves the People's Party and named two primary objectives: first, to convert the absolute monarchy into a constitutional monarchy; and second, to use the state to achieve economic and social progress for the people of Siam (Baker 2005).

To ensure the success of their planned coup, the People's Party returned to Siam and worked over the next few years to convert a group of senior military officers to adopt their political views and renounce the king's absolute authority. Phraya Phanon Phonphayuhasena<sup>5</sup> led the way for other senior military officers to join the party. In light of the global depression of the 1930s and the consequent mounting resentment of the absolutist government, the coup was met with little resistance. On June 24<sup>th</sup>, 1932, the People's Party captured the commander of the

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<sup>3</sup> The country was formally known as Siam until June 23, 1939, when it was changed to Thailand. It was briefly renamed Siam from 1945-1949, after which it was again renamed to Thailand.

<sup>4</sup> Both Plaek Pibulsongkram (a military student) and Pridi Banomyong (a law student) were part of this original planning group and would both go on to serve as Prime Minister

<sup>5</sup> "Phraya" is feudal title given to males by the king; it can be interpreted as the equivalent of a Marquis

royal guard, arrested about forty members of the royal family, and announced that the absolute monarchy was finished.

With Pridi's guidance, the People's Party proceeded to draft a provisional constitution that outlined three stages of progression towards a parliamentary democracy. The first stage would be complete military rule; the second stage, would be rule by an assembly that was half indirectly elected and half appointed by the military; and the final stage was supposed to feature a direct and democratically elected parliament (Elliot 1978). In an effort to sabotage the People's Party, the few remaining royalists spread inflammatory rumors that the coup leaders had a hidden communist agenda. In response, the People's Party apologized to King Prajadhipok for excluding him in the draft of the provisional constitution and invited him to participate in drafting the permanent constitution.

On December 10<sup>th</sup>, 1932 Thailand's first official constitution was ratified. Unlike the provisional constitution, the permanent constitution stopped the progression of government at stage two with a National Assembly that was half appointed by the People's Party and half elected. Furthermore, provisions in the constitution consolidated most of the real executive power with the Prime Minister and his Cabinet.

As exemplified by the conservative provisions of the 1932 constitution and the removal of Pridi's "third stage" of democracy featuring a fully elected parliament, the coup was not a true revolution in the sense that it did not feature a suppressed social group rising to power to restructure societal order. It was instead simply a shift of control from one faction of elites to another. In fact, the years following the coup were wrought with political instability as Thailand's political arena had opened up to new conflicts emerging from competing elite factions. The three major factions were: the older conservative civilian elites led by Phraya

Manopakorn Nititada; the military faction led by senior officer Phraya Phahon and junior officer Plaek Phibunsongkhram (or simply Phibun); and the young revolutionary civilian elites led by Pridi.<sup>6</sup>

To lead the fledgling government, the People's Party selected Phraya Manopakorn (leader of the older conservative civilian faction) to be Thailand's first Prime Minister. Manopakorn, who had been one of the few non-royal members of the Privy Council (the King's appointed advisors), was another compromise between the King and the new government. However, the King sought to manipulate Manopakorn to keep strong control over the governing of Thailand. When Pridi proposed a new economic plan to nationalize land and in effect redistribute the massive land holdings of the nobility, the King convinced Manopakorn to take action. Manopakorn rejected Pridi's proposals on the grounds of "communist tendencies," pressured the Assembly to do the same, passed an Anti-Communist Act against land reforms, and exiled Pridi (Baker 2005).

In response, the military faction of the People's Party staged a coup in June 1933. Led by senior officer Phraya Phahon, they dismissed Manopakorn's government, purged several more royalists from the army and Cabinet, and recalled Pridi from exile. Phraya Phahon declared himself as the second Prime Minister of Siam and sent a report to King Prajadhipok, asking for his support. After the new government was able to effectively put down a resistance movement led by King Prajadhipok's cousin, Prince Boworadet, the King reluctantly agreed to support the new government. After a brief period of evading relationships with the new government by spending time abroad, King Prajadhipok decided to abdicate from the throne in 1935 as a final gesture of disapproval for the new government. In his abdication speech, he said, "I am willing

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<sup>6</sup> Civilian elites consist of Thais who are not directly part of the aristocracy, but have longstanding familial legacies and ties to the royal family

to surrender the powers I formerly exercised to the people as a whole, but I am not willing to turn them over to any individual or any group to use in an autocratic manner without heeding the voice of the people.” The quote is often cited as an insightful description of traditional Thai politics and the unwillingness of the Thai polity to allow the general populace to have substantial political voice (Batson 1984). For the next sixteen years, Thailand would have no resident, reigning monarch, as King Prajadhipok’s successor, Prince Ananda Mahidol, was only 10 years old and studying abroad in Switzerland.

With the royalists finally silenced, the new government would have to prove its legitimacy. However, two factions remained within the People’s Party between the military and civilian elites. While Phraya Phahon remained in power as Prime Minister, these factions were able to work together harmoniously. Phraya Phanon allowed Pridi the freedom to pursue a number of political projects, including the establishment of new codes removing all legal bases for aristocratic privilege and increased government spending for education, roads, hospitals and electricity generation.

For a brief period, the military was content to share its power with civilian elites. However this all changed when Phraya Phahon was pressured into retirement in 1938 due to a scandal involving the sale of royal real estate. His successor, Plaek Phibunsongkhram (Phibun), would use his power as Prime Minister to consolidate political power in the military and to leave a legacy of military authoritarianism and dominance.

#### *Thai Nationalism and the Emergence of Military Dominance: 1938-1945*

Phibun had quickly risen through the military leadership ranks and eventually served as Phraya Phahon’s minister of defense. During this time, he developed the belief that the army was the



true center of a nation: without the army, a country could be erased from the world (Baker 2005). When Phibun took over as prime minister in December 1938, he moved quickly to put the military in power. Phibun appointed himself head of the army, as well as minister of defense, interior, and foreign affairs. He packed his Cabinet with military men and increased the military's budget significantly. When the Assembly protested against the increase in the military budget, Phibun dissolved the Assembly. When the newly elected Assembly continued to oppose the budget increase, Phibun simply bypassed the Assembly and began to rule by decree.

To strengthen support for his military-centered government, Phibun used the propaganda techniques of Hitler and Mussolini to promote fascism under the guise of nationalism. With the help of Luang Wichit Wathakan, a skilled political publicist, Phibun pushed a Thai nationalism campaign to centralize power and justify increases in military expenditures. By manipulating the mass media and posting positive photographs of himself in public areas, Phibun transformed the nascent democracy into a dictatorship run by himself and the military. To remove all doubt as to who the true leader was, Phibun also banned all photographs of the abdicated King Prajadhipok and condemned the monarchy as an old, worn-out tradition that stood in opposition to Thailand's new vision of progress and modernization.

The Thai nationalism campaign attempted to impress upon the people of Thailand that they were in fact a unified nation with a clear identity that needed to be protected by the military, i.e. that they needed Phibun to stay in power to protect them. In a symbolic gesture, Phibun officially changed the country's name from Siam to Thailand on June 24<sup>th</sup>, 1939, saying, "We are of the Thai race, but...the name Siam does not correspond to our race" (Baker 2005: 132). He also established a National Culture Commission whose purpose was to strengthen and proliferate the Thai identity. Activities that promoted "Thai-ness" included prescribing rituals

for honoring national symbols and mandating that everyone learn and speak the Thai dialect of the central region. Diversity within the Thai identity was also suppressed. Previous slang words describing non-Thai ethnicities were removed from popular media and people were no longer described by regional differences. To further promote Thai nationalism, people were encouraged to support the Thai economy by buying Thai goods. By building these notions of a unified Thai nation, Phibun could easily justify his actions as part of *national* security. For example, one of the state-edicts issued in 1939 as part of Phibun's nationalism project was a list of treasonous and anti-national activities – these activities could easily be used by Phibun's government to suppress any opposition to the military's increasing power (Baker 2005).

During WWII, Phibun aligned himself with the axis powers, signing a military alliance with Japan on December 12<sup>th</sup>, 1941 and outwardly declaring war on the allied powers on January 25<sup>th</sup>. However, as Japan neared defeat in 1944, Phibun was ousted in June by the Seri Thai (Free Thai) resistance, a collaborative effort between undercover groups led by Pridi and Seni Pramroj, Thailand's ambassador to the United States and a minor royal family member. In an effort to avoid retribution from the allied powers, Pridi invited Seni Pramroj to return from the United States to become Prime Minister and to act as an intermediary between Thailand and the Allied powers in 1945 (Baker 2005).

However, Seni Pramroj did not stay in power for long. With the removal of Phibun, Thailand's political arena experienced a re-opening for elite competition similar to the gap experienced in 1932 with the removal of the absolute monarchy. Different elite factions, sensing the opportunity for power attainment, started to compete with one another. Pridi had returned to prominence with his leadership of the Seri Thai resistance and brought back the promise of civilian liberalism. Royalists also returned from their exile, seeking to regain the power that had

once been theirs: Seni Pramoj and his brother Kukrit formed the royalist Democrat Party in opposition to Pridi's more liberal supporters. A strong militarist elite faction also remained due to the simple fact that the military had amassed too much power during Phibun's regime to be completely silenced. Pridi utilized this murky period to oversee the passage of a new constitution in 1946. Pridi engineered the constitution such that his original vision of a fully elected legislature finally came to fruition. The elite contest would have to be settled at the polls.

### *A Bubble of Democratic Hope: 1946*

In January 1946, democratic elections with Thailand's first legal political parties were held. While the royalist Democrat Party had strong support, Pridi's People's Party won the parliamentary majority. In March 1946, fourteen years after the 1932 revolution, Pridi became Thailand's first democratically elected Prime Minister.

However, this bubble of democratic hope was short lived. In July 1946, the young King Ananda Mahidol, who had recently returned from Europe in December, was found shot dead in his bed under mysterious circumstances. In an effort to get rid of Pridi, Seni Pramoj and Kukrit employed all of their resources to implicate Pridi in the death of the young monarch. The regicide scandal was disastrous for Pridi's political reputation and in August, Pridi was forced to resign. Without Pridi's leadership, the fledgling civilian government struggled to stay afloat until it was eventually brought down by a military coup in November 1947.

### *A Precarious Partnership between the Military and the Monarchy: 1947-1957*

Pridi and his supporters would continue to fight back against the military in an attempt to regain control through a series of counter-coups lasting until 1951. However, Pridi's civilian elites

were no match for a new force that had emerged from the 1947 coup. The coup was the dawning of a new partnership between the military and the royalists. The coup leaders, General Phin Choonhavan, Phao Siyanon, and Colonel Sarit Thanarat, announced that they had acted “to uphold the honor of the army” and to install a government “which [would] respect the principles of Nation, Religion and King” (Baker 2005: 142). By naming the King in their list of elements deserving respect, the military coup leaders were offering a hand of partnership towards the monarchy in stark contrast to the military’s previous anti-monarch sentiments under Phibun’s leadership. In response, the regent to the new King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Ananda’s younger brother) supported the coup within twenty-four hours.

In an interesting move, the new government reinstated Phibun as Prime Minister in 1948. Although Phibun disliked this new unity between the military and the monarchy, he was not fully in control and instead functioned more as a figurehead. The royalist Democrat Party was allowed to control the Cabinet, while the military generals held power in the background. However, the new partnership would prove to be difficult to manage as royalists sought to restore more power to the King. In 1951 the Democrats proposed a new constitution, which increased the King’s formal powers. Angered by these proposals and other political tensions, the military performed another coup on November 26<sup>th</sup>. They completely purged the government of the Democrat Party, promulgated a constitution similar to the 1932 constitution in 1952, and filled the Cabinet with military officers. As historian Chris Baker describes, “The royalists had been demoted to junior partners in the ruling alliance” (Baker 2005: 144). Thailand’s government had once again returned to what was essentially a military dictatorship under the guise of parliamentary democracy.

By 1955 Phibun's ability to control the military government had waned significantly. Two leaders of the 1947 coup, Phao Siyanon and Sarit Thanart had both managed to amass power and support amongst the ruling elites: Police General Phao, accumulated power by organizing a series of brutal anti-communist campaigns, which he used to strengthen the police force and influence; while Sarit accumulated influence by making contacts with the United States and leveraging Cold War politics to gain resources and support. Fearing that he would soon be replaced, Phibun made a last ditch attempt to appeal to the Thai public for support. Promising free elections, Phibun essentially spelled the terms for his removal: the rest of the military regime would simply not tolerate any promises of free elections or liberal democracy. In 1957, military factions led by Sarit Thanarat and General Thanom Kittikachorn staged a coup against Phibun and exiled him indefinitely.

#### *Re-enforcing Thai Traditions and Hierarchies: 1957-1973*

Sarit Thanarat and Thanom Kittikachorn alternated their terms in power until Sarit passed away in 1963 and Thanom took complete control. During their shared regime, the generals oversaw a campaign to restore the prestige and tradition of the monarchy, thereby smoothing relations between the military and the royalist elites. Believing that the monarchy would help unify, stabilize and maintain societal order, Sarit declared that "the King and Nation are one and indivisible" and began referring to the military as the "Army of the King" (Baker 2005: 177). This period reasserted the idea that the military was the true guardian of the Thai people and culture. It was essentially a reincarnation of Phibun's Thai nationalism with a new twist: the concept of "Thai-ness" would now include reverence for the King.

Sarit, a Thai traditionalist, pushed King Bhumibol to assume a more public role. Public royal rituals were reinstated and the King was encouraged to get involved with rural development projects. Films of the King's visits to rural villages were broadcasted regularly on public television. The number of functions, ceremonies and audiences that the King attended rose from about 100 a year in the mid 1950s to 400 a year during the 1960s and 600 a year in the early 1970s (Baker 2005). With this increased attention to the monarchy, King Bhumibol would come to understand his role as the King of Thailand to be the protector of the people. This self-perceived role would evolve to include the need to monitor Thai politics, as well as interfere directly during moments of political instability. This empowered position of the monarchy would play a key role in the upcoming political crises, as discussed in later chapters.

With guidance from the United States, the Sarit and Thanom regimes also focused on promoting economic development and capitalism in Thailand. Sarit adopted a five-year development plan produced by the World Bank in 1961. The plan focused on intensifying the use of Thailand's natural resources, using income surpluses for investment in the urban economy, and facilitating foreign investment. The number of banks increased dramatically during this period. Capital investments flourished, as Chinese entrepreneurs flocked to Thailand to invest and build a variety of entrepreneurial initiatives. Investments in higher education also increased in hopes of developing the quality of human capital in Thailand: the number of tertiary students increased from 18,000 in 1961 to 100,000 in 1972 (Baker 2005).

However, in an unforeseen twist of fate, the economic progress and modernization that Sarit and Thanom promoted would eventually lead to serious challenges to military control, as the rise of powerful new business elites and a politically engaged and educated middle class was just on the horizon.

*A Modest Rise in the Influence of Civil Society: Student Protests in the 1970s*

After Sarit's death, Thanom took over as Prime Minister and proceeded to lead an increasingly corrupt regime. However, by the early 1970s, Thai society as a whole had modernized and consequently developed a new level of political awareness that was intolerant of corruption and unjustified authoritarian rule. After Thanom reappointed himself as Prime Minister four separate times and executed a coup against his own government to purge all opposition from it, Thailand's popular society became increasingly intolerant of his actions.

A new student movement emerged in opposition to the military government. The movement culminated in October 1973, when thirteen students and professors who had publicly demanded a new constitution were arrested. The arrests caused massive protest demonstrations that peaked on October 13<sup>th</sup>. The demonstrations swelled to several hundred thousand, as ordinary citizens from the rising middle class also attended the student protests. The government reluctantly released the prisoners on October 13<sup>th</sup>; however, the next day, as crowds were dispersing from a student rally at Thammasat University in Bangkok, chaos ensued. The police and military opened fire on the crowd, leading to three days of unprecedented violence against the general public. In the aftermath, an estimated 65 were killed and nearly 1,000 were injured (Neher 1975).

In this moment of political instability, King Bhumibol stepped in and sided with the student protestors, expressing disapproval of Thanom's regime. In response, a large portion of the military withdrew from the conflict, refusing to continue following Thanom's orders if they stood in opposition to the King's wishes (Sarit's mantra: "Army of the King" had fully taken into effect). The King ordered Thanom and his two closest supporters, his son Colonel Narong and

Narong's father-in-law Praphas Charusathien, to leave the country.<sup>7</sup> Thanom resigned and King Bhumibol publicly appointed Dr. Sanya Dharmasakti, a respected law professor, to the premiership. These events elevated King Bhumibol's power: the King was now accepted as the ultimate arbiter of political order and the nation's mediator in times of political conflict.

After Thanom stepped down, Thailand witnessed a brief reprieve from complete military dominance between 1973 and 1976. With a new constitution passed in 1974 and a popular election featuring a multitude of legitimate political parties in 1975, the outlook for popular democracy seemed promising. However, this period proved to be a premature attempt at legitimate popular democracy. The premiership shuffled between Sanya Dharmasakit, Seni Pramroj and Kukrit Pramroj (Seni's brother) as they struggled to establish and preserve popular democracy. However, Thailand's civilian class had not developed enough to produce a stable political class that could withstand military and conservative terror-campaigns. Although a moderate, middle class campaign led by Kukrit was beginning to emerge, dangerous tensions between the conservative military elites and an ultra-liberal coalition of students, intellectuals and the working class would unravel moderate politics.

The army and conservative elites attempted to suppress the liberal coalition by waging a propaganda campaign, labeling all liberals as dangerous communists. Staging any form of public protest became grounds for arrest under accusations of communist conspiracy (Baker 2005). The military conservatives would go on to persecute not only liberally bent politicians, but also moderate politicians such as Kukrit. As Thanin Krivixien (the soon-to-be military prime minister) would later reflect, "When you deal with politics, you've got to be wary of the middle ground because that is where the communists creep in..." (Girling 1977: 401). By effectively

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<sup>7</sup> Many suspected that Thanom was attempting to build a political dynasty with Narong and Praphas, and as a result, the three of them had to all be removed from power (Neher 1975).



controlling Thai media and waging terror campaigns against liberal and moderate politicians, the military successfully used Cold-War-era anxieties to weaken the appeal of liberal and moderate political agendas.

The tension and polarization ultimately culminated in another massive student rally gone wrong. On October 6, 1976, police surrounded some two thousand students who were protesting peacefully at Thammasat University. A bloody suppression of the student movement ensued as the police proceeded to fire grenades and explosive shells. Students who tried to escape the building were brutally lynched, raped, or burnt alive. That evening the military regained power by performing another coup and placed Thanin Krivixien in power as prime minister. Another glimmer of democracy had come and gone.

#### *Premocracy: 1981-1988*

After the promises of a popular democracy were once again shattered, the military also experienced some internal struggles of its own. In October 1977, a different section of the military staged another coup, replacing Thanin with General Kriangsak Chomanand. And in April 1981, a different clique of the military, known as the “Young Turks” attempted to stage yet another coup. The coup eventually failed, but Kriangsak decided to retire anyway. The premiership then fell to Prem Tinsulanonda, who would continue in the tradition of military dominance over the polity in the name of the king.

A new political structure of military control emerged under the new constitution of 1978. Often called “Premocracy” by Thai intellectuals, the National Assembly was restored and open for popular election, but was counter-balanced by an appointed Senate, consisting primarily of

military elites. Through support from the Senate and the monarchy, Prem was able to remain prime minister for over eight years.

In exchange for the King's support, Prem reciprocated by allowing King Bhumibol's public role in the polity to increase. The government began allocating a portion of the national budget to fund the King's increasing number of rural development projects. The king's role as a national ceremonial figure also grew to an even larger scale than before with expensive, visually stunning processions, and the reinstatement of prostration as an appropriate greeting towards the King. With the expansion of the King's public prominence and his critical role in the 1973 student uprising, the King's role in Thai politics was cemented: the army would continue to look towards the King as the ultimate arbiter of power.

Prem's premiership finally ended in 1988, after a general election brought Chatichai Choonhavan to power. Although a former general, Chatichai would go on to demonstrate more loyalty towards a new, emerging elite group: Thai businessman. This new elite group would prove to be a worthy opponent to the military's longstanding dominance over all other elite groups, leading to the longest period of sustained military-free democracy in Thai history.

### *Chapter Summary*

In summary, there has been a long-standing history of competition and conflict between various elite groups battling for power since the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932. These elite groups consisted of royalists, militarists, and liberal civilians with familial legacies tied to serving the royal family (as exemplified by Pridi Banomyong). For the majority of Thai history, the military elites have dominated over all other competing elite factions, agreeing only to share it with the monarchy beginning with Sarit Thanarat's premiership. This partnership with the

monarchy would increase over time, eventually placing King Bhumibol in the role of ultimate arbiter of power amongst elite groups. In other words, over time the King gained the unique power to mediate elite pacts and power structures during times of political instability. As witnessed by the 1973 student-led revolution, the King did not always side with the military, adding a wild-card element to Thai politics. One feature that has remained consistent throughout this period of traditional Thai politics is an absence of sustained popular democracy free from the influence of military and aristocratic elites. The two glimmers of democracy in 1946 and 1973 were quickly shut down by elite group partnerships. Egalitarian-minded civilian elites, such as Pridi, were never allowed to fully install the constitutional democracies that would allow for direct involvement from the general public. Furthermore, once these liberal civilian elites (e.g. Seni Pramoj, leader of the Democrat Party) had the opportunity to establish a popular democracy, the middle class was not yet strong enough to properly participate.

However, during these political battles, Thailand's economy was also changing. As modernization and economic development spread across Thailand, new socio-economic classes also started to emerge. These new classes would go on to challenge the dynamics of traditional Thai politics as old elite factions were faced with the onset of a new elite group (Thai businessmen) and a newly empowered populace (the middle and lower classes) during the political crisis of the 1990s and 2000s.

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## **The Road to Democratic Consolidation: Restructuring Thailand's Political Arena (Late 1980s-1997)**

Beginning in the 1980s, Thailand experienced a change in its economy. Economic growth rates started to increase considerably, eventually earning it the title of a “tiger economy.” However, this was not the only change that Thailand underwent during this period of economic prosperity. The shape of Thailand's political arena was also beginning to precariously transform. After experiencing some political growing pains in the early 1990s, Thailand was on its way to stable democratic rule by the late 1990s.

To modernization theorists, this association between politics and economics would come as no surprise. As they would hypothesize, this period of economic prosperity in fact aided Thailand's pathway to stable democracy by cultivating a middle class. More specifically, these theories would suggest that as economic prosperity and social development improved the political voice of a larger portion of the population, the population would become less susceptible to political corruption, thereby paving the way to a stable democracy.

On the other hand, elite theorists would suggest that this period of Thai history was heavily influenced by the unity or disunity of elite groups. More specifically, they would argue that the disunity between the new business elites and the traditional military elites caused the political instability and corrupt vote buying of the 1980s to the early 90s. Furthermore, they would suggest that, eventually, the clashing elite groups consolidated under a new agreement

that clearly delegated power amongst the competing elite groups, leading to the democratic consolidation of the later part of the 1990s.

Political institutionalists would offer yet another perspective, claiming that Thailand's pathway toward democratic consolidation was aided by the mechanisms of parliamentary democracies, which avoid party polarization and "winner-take-all" election politics. During this particular time period of democratic breakdown and consolidation, I find that political institutionalist theories do not account well for either the breakdown of 1991 or the consolidation of the late 1990s, because there was no official political reform during this time. However, with the creation of the 1997 constitution, political institutionalist causal mechanisms do play a role in the 2006 breakdown and will consequently be examined in the next chapter.

In the following sections, I instead find that this period demonstrates how both elite and modernization theories interacted complementary to one another to restructure Thai politics toward democratic consolidation. In the chapter's first section, *Disunity between the Military and the Business Elites*, I demonstrate how the emergence of a new elite group of Thai business tycoons disrupted traditional elite group power structures, challenging the military's monopoly over political power. This tension between the military and business elites eventually caused democratic breakdown in 1991, as predicted by elite theories on elite group disunity. However, this brief period of political instability was in fact a necessary sub-process in a larger movement toward democratic consolidation. In the following section, *The Protests of 1992 & a New Political World*, I demonstrate how the Thai middle class, strengthened by two decades of economic growth and modernization, successfully protested the military's corruption. These protests created such an epic display of violence that the elite groups of Thailand (the king, the military and the business elites) were then forced to form a new elite pact that removed the

military from monopolized power. This unique alignment of business elite and middle class interests demonstrates the link between elite and modernization theories in fostering the beginnings of democratic consolidation: a new political world was forged and stabilized by a pact amongst clashing elite groups, and this pact was a result of political pressure from new, politically aware modernized middle class citizens. I then conclude the chapter with the section, *The 1997 Constitution*. In this section, I describe how this new political world was then enshrined by the passage of the 1997 constitution, creating a unique moment in Thai history that made democratic consolidation seem possible.

#### *Disunity between the Military and the Business Elites*

As Thailand began to experience an economic boom, a new elite-group began to emerge: the Thai Business Man. These new elites were completely different from Thailand's dominant elite group: the military. Traditionally, the ideal Thai man was an ethnically Thai military general from Bangkok. In contrast, these new elites were ethnically Chinese entrepreneurs from the provinces of Thailand (White 2009).<sup>8</sup>

As economic growth strengthened and emboldened the business elite socio-economic class, these new elites took the next step towards more power: entering politics. These business savvy individuals saw politics as a new arena to conquer for financial gain, creating a multitude of political parties and local networks of power aimed solely at getting specific individuals in power. They did not function as a cohesive group, but rather as a new brand of Thai elites that operated in a new module that sought local support and influence to generate power.

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<sup>8</sup> In 1982, Thailand's population was 75% Thai, 14% Chinese and 11% other (which includes a number of periphery hill tribes, as well as immigrants from surrounding countries). Source: World Fact Book 1982.

More specifically, the business elites took advantage of the looser, more flexible rule of law in Thailand's provinces to promote their businesses and create provincial networks of influence and power. Functioning in a similar manner to the Italian godfathers of America, the business elites took advantage of the lack of law, access to semi-official armed forces, connections to key local officials, and reinvestment in local patronage to accumulate money and power. As Baker describes in his history of Thailand, "They were increasingly referred to as *itthiphon* (influence), *itthiphon muet* (dark influence), or *jao pho*. This last term originally referred to a local spirit and alluded to super-natural power to act above the law. It was also an exact translation of 'godfather'" (Baker 2009: 243).

By leveraging these provincial local networks of power, Thai business elites were able to assert a strong presence in a traditionally military elite-centered political world. During elections, they used village-level networks, cash, official backing, pork-barrel offers to fund local projects, vote buying, intimidation, and ballot stuffing to gain votes (Baker 2009). With these tactics, more ambitious business elites, such as Surin Tothapthiang (leading entrepreneur of Trang province) and Suchon Champhuno (real estate investor and banker of Phitsanulok Province), were heading to Bangkok as members of parliament, posing a substantial new threat to military dominance (Montesano 2000).

According to elite theories, the absence of a pact between elite groups leads to intense political instability. Following this line of thought, the emergence of the Thai business elites without a corresponding, new elite group pact would hypothetically lead to mounting political instability and increased potential for regime breakdown.

This is in fact what we see in Thailand. As Pasuk describes in her analysis of corruption in Thailand, "Under the bureaucratic polity, bureaucrats including the military were in a position



to monopolize the revenue from corruption. Of course there would be competition among individuals and groups within the bureaucracy, but these could be settled by time-honoured techniques of factional alliance, negotiation, and compromise. The rise of business groups has brought in a new kind of competitor” (Pasuk 1996: 15). Instead of establishing an agreement with the newly empowered business elites, the military clashed with them, generating political instability that could not be addressed by traditional elite bargaining techniques.

As a result, Thailand’s political arena became a hotbed for competition between the military and business elites. And the business elites were winning. In the elections of 1983, 137 out of 567 House seats belonged to businessmen, while military/police officers only held 103 (IPU).

With their increasing political power, the new business elites sought to dismantle previous power structures that kept the military elites in power. For example, as members of parliament, they led mandates to limit the military’s budget and access to covert arms purchases. Pasuk explains these actions, saying, “The new business politicians’ have deliberately mounted attacks on [Thailand’s] revenue from corruption which flows to the bureaucracy, and particularly to the military. They see the importance of cutting off the resource flows which the military can use for building, consolidating, and defending their prominent role in the polity” (Pasuk 1996: 16).

It is important to note that while competition for political power is often seen as a positive element in democratic consolidation, political competition that directly involves the military actually generates more risk for political regime breakdown. This is a result of the military’s unique power to easily perform coups that restructure political regimes whenever they feel truly threatened. This phenomenon is clearly demonstrated by the coup of 1991.

This coup was aimed specifically in opposition to General Prem Tinsulnonda's successor, Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan. Although Chatichai was an army general, he was also a Sino-Thai who demonstrated more loyalty towards his civilian businessmen peers than his military peers. In fact, most of his cabinet consisted of business elites, including well-known *jao pho* (White 2009; Pasuk 1996).

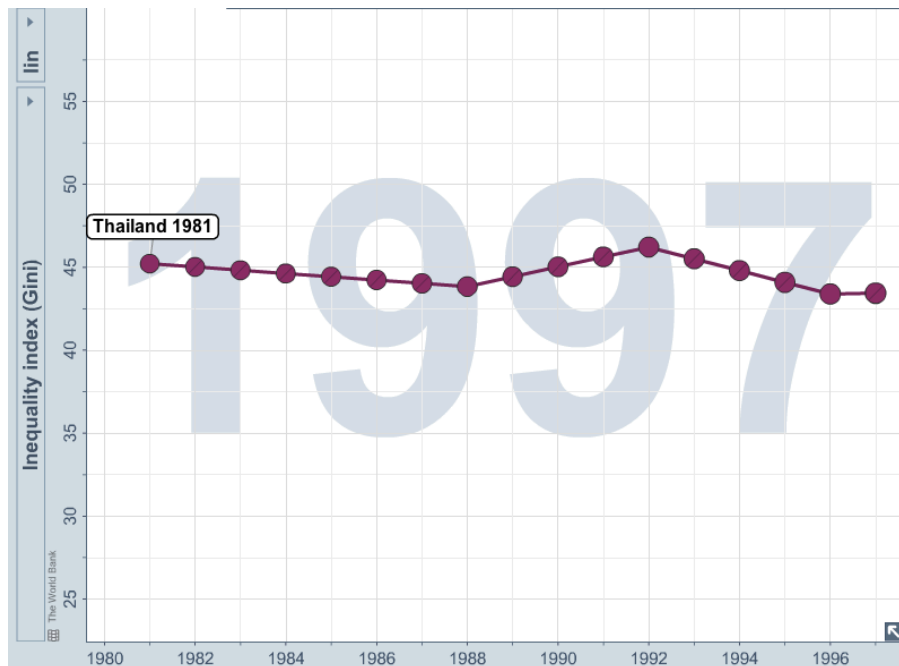
After Chatichai passed a constitutional amendment that increased the power of the lower-house National Assembly (a business elite stronghold) and decreased the power of the military-appointed Senate, General Suchinda Kraprayoon had finally had enough of the business elite's push for political power (White 2009). By February 1991, Suchinda staged another coup in hopes of reestablishing the military's dominance over Thai politics. In addition, the military used the momentum from this coup to further weaken the top business elites in power, such as Chatichai, by seizing assets and charging them for corruption.

This period of political instability, culminating in the coup of 1991, provides support for elite theories that claim that if there is not an agreement between elite groups, they will continue to fight, leaving political regimes unstable. Before the emergence of the new business elites, political power normally remained in the hands of military elites. While factions existed even within this same brand of elites, there existed methods of conflict resolution, i.e. elite pacts and codes of conduct that kept Thailand under the dominance of the military. However, with the introduction of a completely new and different elite group, these elite pacts no longer applied, resulting in disruptive competition and political instability. Although the coup of 1991 created a pitfall for democracy in that particular year, this period of political instability was in effect a positive step towards democratic consolidation in Thailand. While the emergence of a new elite

group challenging the power of military elites resulted in a period of competitive political instability, the emergence of this elite group would prove necessary in a broader movement towards democratic consolidation via the removal of the military's monopoly over political power.

### *The Protests of 1992 and a New Political World*

While these two elite groups clashed in search of gaining a monopoly over political power in Thailand, another socio-economic class was beginning to emerge. As Thailand's economy continued to grow and spread its benefits to a larger proportion of the population, a Thai middle class also began to grow and strengthen. Figures 2, 3A and 3B illustrate the rise of an educated middle class as economic inequality in Thailand starts to steadily diminish in the period 1981-88 and the average number of years enrolled in the education system increases consistently for both men and women.



**Figure 2: Thailand's GINI coefficient over time. Source: World Bank**

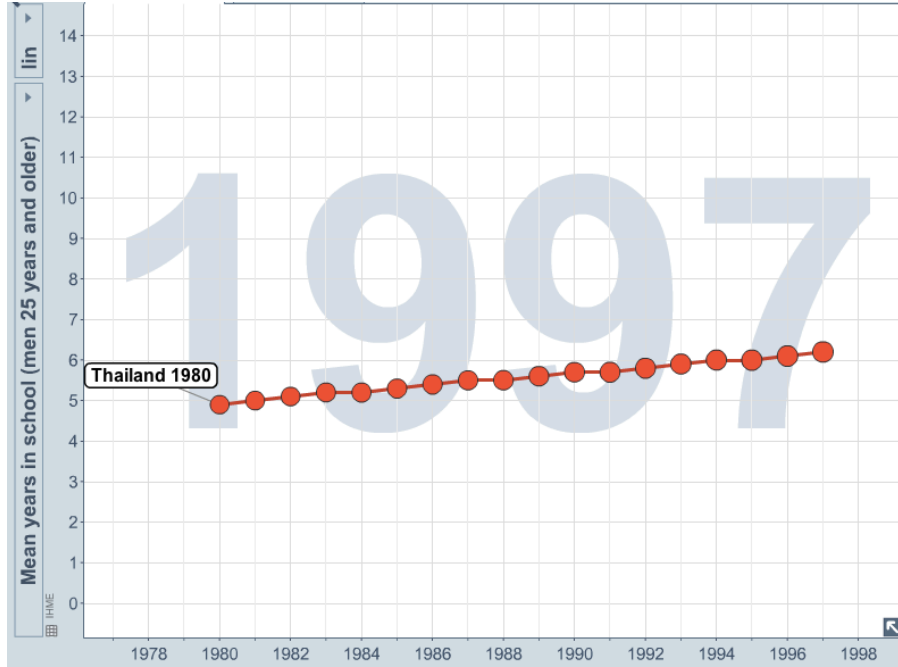


Figure 3A: Average years in school for Thai men over time. Source: Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation.

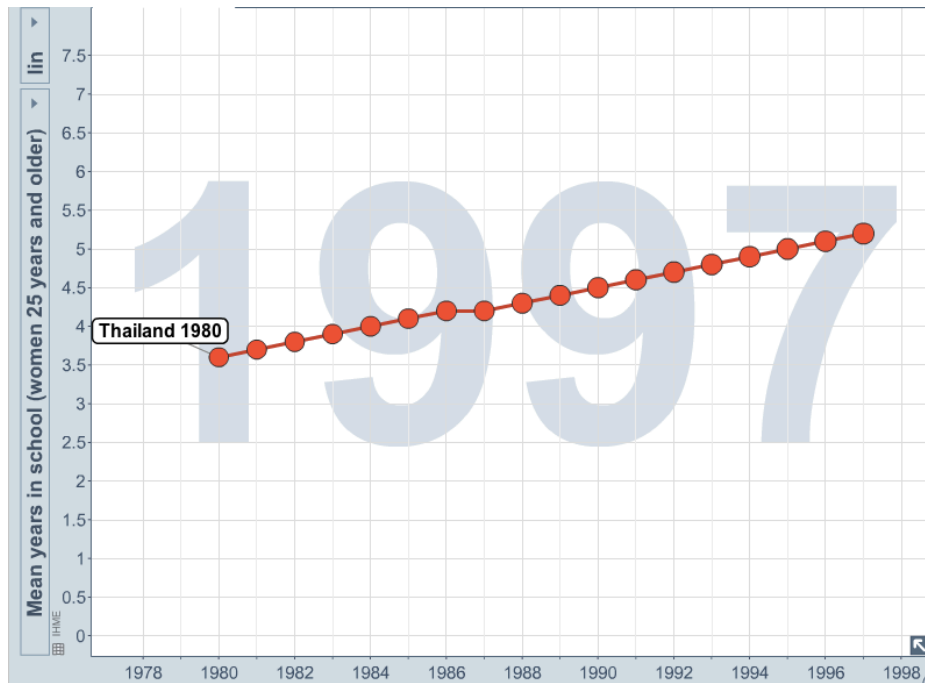


Figure 3B: Average years in school for Thai women over time. Source: Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation.

This period of increasing economic and intellectual resources also corresponded to increasing social opportunities that promoted education, communication and ultimately, civil society. Thailand became exposed to new media and information via televisions and radios – objects that more and more Thais were able to afford as the economy continued to improve. Economic prosperity also enabled information to travel from village to village with improved transportation infrastructure and mobility. For example, provincial roads grew from 5,891 km in 1970 to 27,595 in 1989 (Ockey 2000). As Baker describes, “Business prospered. The middle class grew larger and more assertive...Changes in literacy, mobility, and media created a new sense of a mass society...” (Baker 2009: 199).

According to modernization theories, we should expect that as Thailand’s middle class continues to grow and benefit from increases in economic and social resources, the public’s political conscience and political voice should become stronger and less tolerant of electoral and political corruption. These modernization theories are in fact confirmed by the public protests of May 1992. In response to the coup of 1991 and General Suchinda Kraprayun’s illegitimate rise to premiership, multiple pro-democracy groups with legacies extending back to the 1970s student protests revived themselves. These groups came together to form a Campaign for Popular Democracy (CPD). The leaders of the CPD organized large protest and hunger strikes against the military.

On May 17<sup>th</sup>, 1992, around 200,000 members of the middle class gathered in Bangkok for a massive demonstration. Led by the CPD and the mayor of Bangkok, Chamlong Srimuang, this protest served as a turning point in Thai political history, because the middle class had finally become large enough to generate a strong political voice – a significant improvement to the failed student protests of the 1970s. Furthermore, these middle class citizens emerged not

only from Bangkok, but also from at least 30 of 75 Thailand's provinces, creating an unprecedented situation in which citizens outside of Bangkok were actually politically engaged (LoGerfo 2000). For the first time in Thai history, a widespread, national civil society had emerged and grown to a level that could not be ignored.

Unfortunately, these protests ended in a similar fashion to the student protests of 1973 and 1976. The military opened fire on the unarmed protestors, continuing the violence over three nights. However, the power of Thailand's newly developed civil society continued to play a role. As Baker says, "The press defied censorship and published full reports" (Baker 2009: 248). Thailand's push for democracy coincided with similar movements elsewhere in the world, as modernization provided new tools for protest and political voice. For example, liberal, democratic trends began to spread in Africa, with South Africa leading the way. And with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, a number of countries also became democratic. As other parts of the world began to democratize, the pressure for Thailand to follow suit was also present in the background.

Due to mounting pressure from national and international civil society, the top elite groups of Thailand moved to create a new pact that reorganized political power with the help of the Thai monarchy. As in previous moments of political instability (e.g. the political crisis of the 1970s), King Bhumibol decided to step in and dictate what the new political structure should be. In a televised, public broadcast, the King called for an apology from both mayor Chamlong Srimuang and the military's top general, Suchinda Kraprayun on May 20<sup>th</sup>. With this action, the King issued an unspoken agreement amongst Thailand's top elite groups. By calling for a public apology from Suchinda, the King essentially removed the military's monopoly over political power, calling for an end to the surmounting competition between the military and business

elites. As a result, Thailand's political power structure was redesigned to accommodate more business elites.

Suchinda resigned, giving way to a slew of interim prime ministers,<sup>9</sup> as Thailand's political arena focused on restructuring itself around the production of a new, revolutionary constitution. While Thai politics struggled to solidify a new government and constitution, the removal of the military from complete political power was already evident. For example, the prime minister's cabinet during the 1950s-70s saw a total of 85 military/state elites, but only 5 business elites. In stark contrast, the prime minister's cabinet in 1995-96 consisted of 43 businessmen and only 5 military elites (White 2009: 389).

As the military found itself displaced in domestic political power, it sought power elsewhere by switching its focus to international patrol, monitoring the illegal border trafficking of people, drugs, arms and other contraband (Baker 2009). And as a result the elite pact was stabilized: domestic political power was relinquished to the growing business and civilian elites, while international political power was adopted by a complicit military.

This series of events demonstrates that Thailand's new road towards democracy consolidation needed both the causal mechanisms of modernization theories and elite theories. Modernization and the middle class called for an end to military corruption, which spurred a new elite agreement. Without the newfound political voice and power of the middle class to protest against the military, the military and business elites may have continued to battle for political power, leading to more coups. And without the emergence of the business elite in the first place,

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<sup>9</sup> As seen in previous political restructurings, Thai politics witnessed a brief period of reshuffling with quickly rotating interim prime ministers as competing groups vied to fill the void left from the previously dominant political power. These prime ministers included Meechai Ruchuphan (May 24 – June 10, 1992), Anand Panyarachun (June 10 – September 23, 1992), Chuan Leekpai (September 23, 1992 – July 13, 1995), Banharm Silpa-Archa (July 13, 1995 – November 25, 1996), Chavalit Yongchaiyudh (November 25, 1996 – November 9, 1997), and Chuan Leekpai for a second time (November 9, 1997 – February 9, 2001).

there would be no real challenge to previous elite power structures (the middle class would not have been able to pose a real threat to the military's political power, they needed a new group of civilian elites to properly challenge the military). In other words, the rise of the middle class and the new business elites were both necessary conditions for democratization.

### *The 1997 Constitution*

After the protests of 1992 and the emergence of a new political world, a new constitution was needed to institutionalize the change. In the interim period between 1992 and 1997, Thailand's government scrambled to restructure itself as various socio-economic groups, including state technocrats, public intellectuals, the public media, progressive politicians, developmental NGOs, business elites, and progressive labor unions, struggled to push their own brand of political reform. Thailand's political murkiness continued until finally Dr. Prawase Wasi, a social critic and public intellectual, declared to a crowded Bangkok ballroom full of elites and intellectuals that Thailand urgently needed a new constitution to integrate the multitude of emerging political reform ideologies and to capture the spirit of the new political order (McCargo 2007). Shortly thereafter, an amendment in 1996 called for the creation of such a constitution.

To ensure that this new constitution would in fact promote democratic consolidation, a new method of constitution drafting was established to mirror the new political order. For the first time in Thai history, the drafting process sought to involve as much public participation as possible. After four years of huge, organized public rallies demanding the involvement of civil society in the drafting process, Parliament formally established the Constitutional Drafting Assembly (CDA) in 1996. The CDA consisted of 99 members; 76 of whom were elected by house members to represent their respective province, while the other 23 were experts in public



law, political science and public administration as listed by top universities. By organizing the CDA in this manner, the drafting process itself reflected the new political order: the military elites were no longer directly involved. This stands in clear contrast to Thailand's traditional political history, which usually reserved the privilege of constitution drafting to the military and its allies alone. Instead, the CDA consisted solely of elected representatives, who were generally members of the business elites and leaders of civil society. The CDA's two primary leaders, Uthai Phimchaichon (CDA president) and Anand Panyarachun (Drafting Committee president) represented the two main constituencies of the political reform movements: Uthai was a popular leader of civil society who had been imprisoned in the 1970s for his public stance against military rule; and Anand was a business mogul who appealed to other business elites and the urban middle class (Connors 2003). The CDA was also mandated to conduct public opinion surveys throughout the process to further involve the public, especially the middle class, in the drafting process (Uwanno and Burns 1998). Thus, all of the key socio-economic groups (i.e. the business elites, leaders of civil society and the middle class), who played major roles in creating the new political order, were also directly involved in the creation of the new constitution.

By August 1997, the CDA had submitted a final draft. The new constitution sought to pass legislation that would transform government by elite militarists to government by the people with a focus on recognizing more civil liberties and making government more transparent. The constitution's most revolutionary measure that embodied the end of military rule was the opening of both the Senate and National Assembly to direct elections. Previously, the parliament was either fully appointed or split between half appointed and half elected, thereby assuring a means for the military to always have direct control over the government. By opening both houses for direct election, the 1997 constitution created a means for civilians, like the Thai

business elites, to formally gain control of the government through elections. This effectively eliminated one of the primary tools used by the military to control Thai politics through “legitimate” means. In other words, an earnest attempt was finally made to establish Thai democracy, such that members of the military elite would have to compete on an equal and fair playing field with the civilian business elites. And since, the civilian business elites had more appeal in the polls (due to their influential power networks in the provinces) than old military elites, the new constitution effectively paved the way for a government ruled by the business elites. The full effect of this measure was apparent in the 2001 election, in which the Thai Rak Thai party, led by business mogul Thaksin Shinawatra, would sweep a majority of the house seats.

A sample of some of the other innovative measures established by the 1997 Constitution is listed in Appendix I. These measures focused on strengthening civil liberties and increasing government transparency and accountability, making another statement about the public’s strong intolerance for any return to military influence in the future. The Thai population had grown to associate government corruption with military rule. Thus, by outlining clear legislation to combat corruption, the 1997 constitution was effectively banishing the military from influencing politics in the future. Both the National Counter Corruption Commission and the Constitutional Court were established to ensure that Thailand’s fledgling government would adhere solely to the 1997 constitution and not fall back into the clutches of military control. Essentially, any acts that were seen as threats to democracy, the constitution or the nation (i.e. attempts to reestablish military control) could be punishable by these government bodies.

Furthermore, the strengthening of civil liberties, such as freedom of information and the press, would also serve as preemptive tools against the military terror and control tactics that

were once an integral part of Thai politics. For example, Article 40 of the proposed constitution outlined the beginning steps to liberalize the ownership of radio, television and telecommunication frequencies. Primarily owned by the military government, these frequencies had previously served as key tools in solidifying the military's influence and control over the general public (Connors 2003). Effectively, the constitution had set up key provisions to protect the new government from future intruding military influence and had preemptively removed any residual tools that could be used to support military dominance.

With such revolutionary conditions and terms, the 1997 constitution might have been too radical to pass if not for the onset of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. As Freedman describes in her analysis of democratization in Asia, "There is no question that the financial crisis of July 1997 served as a catalyst for the passage of the new constitution. Afraid of further political chaos, domestic and international investors withdrew until they felt reassured that political reforms would go forward and that politics would stabilize..." (Freedman 2006: 47). As Thailand began to feel the pressure of economic crisis, the call for political change became necessary and immediate, leaving little tolerance for any protests or arguments that could slow down the passage of the new constitution.

Additionally, the crisis stood as a symbolic test of Thailand's new elite pact amongst the military and business elites. As White writes in his analysis of the relationship between politics and economics in Asia, "The crisis became a test of the army's professionalism and ability to remain low-profile in active politics...Coups had been entirely normal responses to lesser catastrophes before 1992" (White 2009: 441). Unlike Thailand's previous political history, the military did not assert its monopolistic control; instead, it allowed political reform to happen within legitimate political structures, demonstrating its commitment to Thailand's new elite pact.

In fact, as political scientist Chai-Anan described, a new generation of the military was emerging who were “convinced that their best strategy of survival [was] to keep away from direct political involvement and concentrate on the military’s legitimate role and corporate interests” (Chai-Anan 1997: 55).

After the new constitution passed with the King’s official signature on October 11<sup>th</sup>, 1997, Thailand’s pathway to democratic consolidation seemed promising. The new regulatory organizations aimed at minimizing political and electoral corruption already seemed to be working. In 1998, the minister of health was forced to resign after facing corruption charges resulting from artificially inflated drug prices (Uwanno and Burns 1998). In 2000, the Minister of Interior also resigned after the National Counter Corruption Commission accused him of money laundering through falsified loan documents (News article: Thai Interior Minister Resigns 2000). And during the elections of 2000, the Election Commission disqualified 78 victorious candidates due to charges of vote buying and electoral fraud (Ingram 2000). These events and others served as a warning that any government corruption would no longer be tolerated.

With the military finally stepping aside to allow other elite groups to access political power and the emergence of a new constitution, enshrining the values of public engagement and government accountability, democratic consolidation in Thailand finally seemed possible.

### *Chapter Conclusions*

As Thailand began to experience unprecedented economic growth in the 1980s, the seeds of democratic consolidation also began to emerge. More specifically, a new elite group of Thai businessmen emerged with the economic boom, disrupting traditional elite power structures. This instability caused by elite group disunity culminated in another military coup in 1991, in

which the military tried to reassert its dominance over the business elites. This time period confirms elite theories that claim that if elite groups are constantly clashing for power, political regimes will remain fragmented, corrupt and unstable. However, the protests of 1992 that followed the coup served as a turning point for Thai politics and in reality, this brief moment of political instability was in fact, a necessary growing pain that would eventually lead to democratic consolidation by the late 1990s. A larger and more powerful middle class rallied in support of the new business elites, forcing the King to arbitrate a new elite power structure. In other words, this moment of democratic consolidation was the result of a collaboration between modernization and elite causal mechanisms: without the large-scale protests of the modernized middle class, the business elites would continue to clash with the military; and without the elite businessmen, the middle class alone would not be able to pose a serious threat to military rule: popular democracy that placed political power in the hands of the general population was not something the King or the military would ever allow. In conclusion, after experiencing some political instability during the 1980s to early 1990s caused by elite group disunity, Thailand was put on the pathway to democratic consolidation when a newly modernized middle class rallied against the military, forcing the creation of new agreement amongst Thai elite groups. And as a symbol of this new political world shared by the military, the business elites and the middle class, the 1997 constitution was created, giving hope to democratic consolidation and political stability.

## *Appendix I: Key Features of the 1997 Constitution*

### Recognition and Strengthening of Civil Liberties

- Slavery, and torture are prohibited
- Mandate that all arrested persons must be brought to court within 48 hours after arrest
- Recognize an individual's right to privacy
- Guarantee access to media, as well as an end to state and private monopolies over radio, television and telecommunications
- New requirement for state provision of twelve years of free education.

### Increasing Government Transparency and Accountability

- Both the Senate and National Assembly were open for direct elections
- *Anti-vote-buying measures*
  - Voting is made compulsory for the first time
  - Creation of the Election Commission (EC) to administer and oversee elections.  
EC has the power to recall elections.
  - New provision to limit campaign monies
  - Established a mixed electoral system for the House of Representatives: 100 members are elected from party lists, and the other 400 are chosen from single-member constituencies
- *Ensuring Accountability and Anti Corruption*
  - Established a number of independent agencies to ensure government accountability

- National Counter Corruption Commission (NCCC) given the power to investigate and charge any official suspected of being unusually wealthy
- A Constitutional Court designed to deal with any laws or government actions that are challenged as being unconstitutional
- The National Human Rights Commission protects and promotes human rights

\*Primary Source: Uwanno and Burns

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## **Corrupting Democracy: Thaksin and Political Polarization (1997-2006)**

As 1997 drew to a close, Thailand's prospects for legitimate democracy seemed bright. A new political order had emerged with a new set of political actors and a new constitution to reflect the power shift. With mechanisms centered on curtailing abuses of power and combating corrupt electoral processes, the constitution and the people of Thailand were ready for peaceful democracy. However, within the span of a single decade, the foundations of democracy would unravel and Thailand would once again fall back into military rule in 2006. At face value, it would appear that the military had simply decided to reclaim its right to power; however, the actual mechanisms of the breakdown of 2006 are more complex and reveal deeper issues in Thai politics than power-hungry military.

Elite theorists would claim that the military and the rest of the aristocratic elite must have become dissatisfied with the new elite pact. These theories would suggest that one or more of the elite pact members decided to reclaim power by dismantling the newly established democracy, as a result of feeling like their interests were no longer represented by the current power structure.

Initially, modernization theories would seem inconsistent with Thailand's democratic breakdown in 2006, since Thailand continued to experience stable economic growth even after the initial slump of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. As a result of this modernization and growth, Thailand should continue to experience improved levels of equality and education, which should theoretically nourish the development of politically active and empowered middle

and lower classes intolerant of political corruption. Thus, when examining the period leading up to the 2006 breakdown, modernization theorists would look to find hidden impediments or complications with the rise of the political voice of the middle and lower classes.

Political institutionalists would point to the fact that although Thailand's democracy was parliamentary in name, it was actually more presidential in practice. The 1997 constitution increased the powers and authority of the premiership and in essence separated the executive and the legislative branches from one another, thereby undermining the "mutual dependence" that the Prime Minister should have with his parliament. Political institutionalists would also point to the presence of another destabilizing political mechanism: party polarization. Although parliamentary democracies are generally supposed to diminish party polarization and "winner-take-all" election intensity, Thai politics experienced intense polarization due to the nation's growing struggle between pro-Thaksin and anti-Thaksin Thais.

In the following sections, I find that the 2006 breakdown was a result of key causal mechanisms from all three theories converging to create a drastically unstable environment that unfortunately diminished the possibility of democracy in Thailand. The catalyst that brought about these causal mechanisms was in fact a man, Thaksin Shinawatra. His populist and economic interventionist policies and actions provoked both love and hate amongst Thailand's citizens. In the first section of this chapter, I recount how Thaksin was able to harness the discontent of Thailand's poor masses to amass immense political power and how he indirectly inspired the rural poor and their political voice with his developmental and income redistributive policies. In the following section, *Domination: Creating Enemies Amongst Military and Business Elites*, I explore how Thaksin's unlimited power was used to attack both old and new elite groups, disrupting the new elite pact created from the events of late 1990s. While Thaksin

may have empowered and inspired a portion of Thailand's popular society (i.e. the Northern poor), he also managed to alienate a different population of civil society: with his overtly corrupt government practices and attempts to suppress the media, Thaksin enraged the newly empowered middle class, who as modernization theories would predict became more critical of government corruption. By galvanizing these different groups within Thai society, Thaksin's government fostered a deeply polarized political climate as I describe in the section, *Strengthening Anti-Thaksin Sentiments: Mounting Tensions and Political Polarization*. This intense "winner-take-all" political polarization would cause the collapse of Thailand's political institutions, providing the military with enough excuses to re-enter Thai politics and dismantle democracy in 2006.

*Populist and Economic Interventionist Policies: Building a Pro-Thaksin Political Base*

In 2001, Thailand held its first democratic election under the new 1997 constitution. With new constitutional provisions aimed at reducing the fragmentation of parliament into numerous small racketeering groups centered around paternalistic elites, nation-wide political parties with clear political platforms became more important than ever.<sup>10</sup> One party in particular was able to successfully sweep up national support: the Thai Rak Thai party (TRT).

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<sup>10</sup> The following were provisions identified by Allen Hicken as party-consolidating provisions from the 1997 Constitution:

- The House was redesigned to be single-seat districts instead of multi-seat districts. This lowers district magnitude and as a result, diminishes the importance of district party competition.
- Electoral candidates were required to be members of their party for at least 90-days prior to an election. This curbed party switching, since the Prime Minister could call for re-elections with only 60 days notice. This in turn empowered the Prime Minister over intraparty factions, thereby increasing the payoff of being the largest party in government.

These provisions encouraged political parties to move away from fragmented racketeering groups towards consolidated nation-wide parties vying to become the largest party in government.

Founded by billionaire businessman Thaksin Shawatra in 1988, the TRT party ran on a populist and economic interventionist platform aimed at appealing to the previously untapped support base of the poor masses and local small business owners. Thaksin, a retired police official and the embodiment of the new successful business elites, recognized the country's need for a progressive, nation-building political platform. As a result of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, rural protests were intensifying as the impact of the crisis spread throughout rural communities. The Democrat Party-led government at the time chose to disregard these protests, keeping with the nation's tradition of ignoring the plight of the Northern, rural poor.

However, Thaksin chose to feed off of this growing discontent to shape the TRT political platform. Consulting civil society leaders such as Praphat Panyachatrak, a famous student activist from the 1970s, Thaksin adopted the vocabulary of strengthening communities and building recovery from the ground up (Pasuk 2009). Proposing a variety of populist policies regarding healthcare and direct community development funds, the TRT party made a bold statement about the need for government to help its people. Even the party's name reflected this new concept of the government serving the interests of the people: Thai Rak Thai translates to "Thais Love Thais." As Thaksin said in a press ad a month before the election polls, "I'd like politicians to *love* their fellow citizens, be compassionate and unselfish, and not be protective of their political careers and positions that they forget the overriding importance of the nation and people" (Pasuk 2009).

In a political climate ripe with the promise of the 1997 constitution and the intensified demand for change from the 1997 Financial Crisis, Thaksin's populist and economic interventionist platform were successful in garnering nation-wide support for the TRT party.

The 2001 election results gave the TRT party the house majority with 248 seats out of 500.<sup>11</sup> The previously dominant party, the Democrat Party (which ran on neoliberal, IMF-backed economic policies) had only 128 house seats with most support coming from the South: the Democrat Party acquired 89% of the vote in the South. In contrast, Thaksin's targeting of the Northern rural poor gave him a strong support base, as most of the country's population is poor and lives in rural regions: over half of the house seats available are representative of North and Northeastern Thailand. The Thai Rak Thai party gained 71% of the vote in the North and 50% of the vote in the Northeast. Thaksin's appeal to small business owners in Bangkok also solidified his voter base in the nation's capital and central Thailand, acquiring 78% of the vote in Bangkok and 50% of the vote in the nearby center regions. Detailed election results by party and region can be found in Table 1.

**Table 1: Election Results by Party and Region, January 2001. Source: Election Commission**

	North	Northeast	South	Center	Bangkok	Total	Party List	Grand Total
Thai Rak Thai	54 (71%)	69 (50%)	1 (2%)	47 (50%)	29 (78%)	200	48	248
Democrat	16 (21%)	6 (4%)	48 (89%)	19 (20%)	8 (22%)	97	31	128
Chat Thai	3 (4%)	11 (8%)	-	21 (22%)	-	35	6	41
Chat Phatthana	1 (1%)	19 (14%)	5 (9%)	3 (3%)	-	28	8	36
New Aspiration	2 (3%)	16 (12%)	-	4 (4%)	-	22	7	29
Seritham	-	14 (10%)	-	-	-	14	-	14
Ratsadon	-	1	-	1	-	2	-	2
Social Action	-	1	-	-	-	1	-	1
Thin Thai	-	1	-	-	-	1	-	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>138</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>400</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>500</b>

<sup>11</sup> The House of Representatives was composed of 400 seats elected from single-member constituencies and 100 seats elected from national party lists on a proportional basis

While in office, Thaksin made a commitment to follow through with his election platform. Some of the populist policies he enacted included an agrarian debt relief scheme that provided rural debtors with the choice between a three-year suspension on repayment of past debt, or a reduction of interest payments. He also implemented a village fund program that provided each village with a 1 million baht revolving loan for development initiatives. He also initiated a government subsidized universal health care program that charges only 30-baht (roughly \$1) per medical visit to the general public (Pasuk 2009).

He also enacted economic policies aimed at supporting and cultivating local businesses and entrepreneurs. Named “Thaksinomics,” these policies followed a developmental statist model in which the government protects and promotes local firms and industries in order to help them compete against already developed economies. As one economic journalist described, “The government guides small and medium sized enterprises up the value-added ladder into better-branded niche products and away from dependence on lower value-added manufacturing” (White 449). These policies included mobilizing and increasing the nation’s credit reserves by using government funds to buy local companies’ stocks and incentivizing banks to loan unused credit reserves to local medium and small enterprises (Pasuk 2009). Thaksin also designed the One Tambon One Product (OTOP) program, which aimed to support the locally made products of Thailand’s sub-districts: each sub-district was asked to select one unique product to receive formal branding as a “starred OTO product,” which provided the product special access to local and international promotion and marketing stages (OTOP website 2003).

All of these developmental and populist policies were in fact effective in improving rural economies and stabilizing the national economy. Income in the Northeast, the poorest part of the country, rose by 46% from 2001 to 2006 (NESDB, Economic Data, 1995-2006). The GINI

coefficient, which indicates income inequality, fell from 43.53 in 1999 to 42.45 in 2004 (this was a significant decrease in inequality since the GINI coefficient remained unchanging from 1996-1999). The percent of the population living in poverty (less than \$2 PPP a day) also decreased significantly from 17.44% in 1999 to 11.51% in 2004 (World Bank).

By providing these government services to people, Thaksin was able to centralize government power. In other words, Thaksin capitalized on the needs of the poor masses to amass power for himself and his political party by appealing to rural networks for support and rewarding them with public money in the form of development services. Although not technically vote buying, this strategy employed the same principle of providing clear monetary incentives in exchange for a vote.

A side effect of Thaksin's electoral strategy of playing "savior to the poor" is the empowerment of a previously marginalized group in Thai society: by bringing political attention to the needs of the rural, Northern poor, Thaksin and the TRT party platform demonstrated that poor farmers and small business owners should not only care about politics, but should also have a political voice in determining who their government is and what their government does. This attention to the Northern poor is unprecedented in Thai history and as a result, it opened the gateway for a new political voice in Thai politics. Furthermore, the development policies enacted by Thaksin's government would also go on to strengthen this new, fledgling political voice as modernization theories would suggest. This newly empowered political voice would play a key role in the political polarization of Thailand, as the rural poor would continue to demand representation in what had been a previously Bangkok, elite-centric political environment.

*Domination: Creating Enemies Amongst Military and Business Elites*

With a political support base grounded in Thailand's poor rural majority, Thaksin was poised to usurp power from competing business elites and military elites. However, Thaksin's power-consolidation campaign would go on to antagonize both of these elite groups, creating renewed elite disunity. As elite theorists would suggest, this renewed disunity among competing elite groups would play a significant role in the 2006 breakdown, as resource-rich elites would assume key leadership roles in the political polarization leading up to the breakdown.

Thaksin used his popularity with the masses to consolidate power and to place his personal network of loyalists into key government positions. As one outspoken senator said, "In the past, we had military dictatorship, but now it's a money dictatorship. Keep a close watch on the Shinawatra, Damapong [Thaksin's brother in law's] and Wongsawat [Thaksin's sister's] families, which will have the same political control as the Kittikachorn, Thanarat, and Charutsathen clans [once had under military power]" (White 2009: 451).

Thaksin's movement to empower his personal network challenged the delicate, relatively new elite pact between the new business elites of Thailand and the old military and aristocratic elites. As described in the previous chapter, the military was sent back to its barracks to make room for the rising business elites, creating a new elite pact between the business and military elites. Instead of respecting what power the military had left, Thaksin, a member of the business elites, pushed his sphere of influence into the military's leadership structure. Thaksin appointed relatives and former classmates to numerous key positions within the military, alienating and destabilizing rival military factions.

In 2001, Thaksin appointed his cousins Uthai and Chaisit Shinawatra to Chief of the Defense Ministry's Planning and Policy Office and deputy commander of the Armed Forces



Development Headquarters respectively. He would go on to push Chaisit up the leadership ladder, eventually making him Assistant Army Commander in charge of the army's finances in 2002, and then Commander-in-Chief in 2003. He also appointed General Songkitti Chakrabart as Fourth Army Deputy Commander even though Songkitti had never served in the Fourth Army. But Songkitti was a classmate of Thaksin from the Armed Force Academies Preparatory School. Thaksin continued to place personal contacts into military leadership positions, adding fifteen more of his AFA Preparatory School classmates in another military reshuffle in 2002; and seven more in 2003 (McCargo 2005).

By 2004, Thaksin's military appointments had created massive tension in the armed forces. As elite theories would predict, the disruption of military autonomy and consequent elite disunity between Thaksin's personal power network and the traditional military elites would encourage both factions to continue fighting for power. General Prem Tinsulanonda, former Prime Minister (1980-1988), led the anti-Thaksin faction of the military from his position on the King's Privy Council. He managed to promote a number of his own associates to key military positions in hopes of counteracting Thaksin's increasing influence over the military. Two key appointments were General Sonthi Boonyaratklin to army chief and General Saprang Kalayanamit to head of the Third Army. Both Sonthi and Saprang had traditional elite lineages tied to Thailand's old officialdom and aristocracy (Pasuk 2009). This resurgence of old military elite lineages was a clear backlash and challenge to Thaksin's growing power in the military. This growing competition between Thaksin and the traditional military elites would go on to play a major role in Thaksin's downfall, as General Prem, General Saprang and General Sonthi would all become leading members of the military junta that would dispose of Thaksin in 2006.

Thaksin further destabilized the elite pact by not only challenging the authority and autonomy of the military, but also by challenging other members of his own elite group: Thai business elites. As elite theorists would predict in response to this disunity, the spurned business elites would also rise up against Thaksin in search of reasserting power, further fostering political instability. Prior to Thaksin's rise to power, business elites had been united against the military; however, once the military was de-politicized, the business elites fragmented into their own personal networks of power and influence. Wary of the threat of other competing business elites and their *jao pho* support networks<sup>12</sup>, Thaksin declared a national war on drugs and other illegal activities indicative of "dark influences," such as prostitution, human trafficking, and trafficking in weapons. By targeting these illegal activities, Thaksin used government resources to empower the Thai police and to keep competing *jao pho* in check. Furthermore, Thaksin made sure to publicize the war on drugs and dark influences, making a clear statement regarding the consequences of opposing his rule. As Lynn T. White writes, "Social evils of all these kinds were rife in Thailand during Thaksin's rule, but he called them corrupt only when they originated among his rivals rather than in his own coalition" (White 2009: 453).

During these national campaigns, Thaksin was able to bring down two previously untouchable, but very high-profile potential competitors to Thaksin's political influence. The first was Somchai "Kamnan Poh" Khunpluem, the head *jao pho* of Chonburi Province. Somchai had wide-ranging political and economic influence, allegedly controlling several members of parliament, including his son, Sontaya Kunplome, who belonged to the Chart Pattana party in opposition to the TRT party (Fullbrook 2004). In 2003, Somchai was arrested for allegedly planning the murder of a business rival, an arrest that would have been impossible in the past.

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<sup>12</sup> Rural power networks led by Thai godfather-like figures as discussed in the previous chapter

The second was Chuwit Kamolvisit, a millionaire-businessman and a powerful figure in Bangkok's prostitution ring. Chuwit was arrested in 2003 for having hired a number of men to conduct a late-night raid of several bars and shops to terrorize Chuwit's own tenants into breaking their leases so that Chuwit could resell the land for redevelopment (Mutebi 2004).

By antagonizing his fellow business elites and their *jao pho* support networks, Thaksin created enemies not only amongst old military elites, but also new business elites. Thus, Thaksin inadvertently created the pathway for his own destruction as dissatisfied elites began to lead anti-Thaksin smear campaigns. For example, Chuwit would go on to expose the corruption of Thaksin's police force and to utilize his economic resources to pose a political threat to Thaksin's government. In 2004, Chuwit announced that he was running for governor of Bangkok as a representative of his own political party, *First Thai Nation*. During his campaign he focused heavily on corruption in the police, openly criticizing Thaksin's government and bringing unwanted media attention to Thaksin's faults. To reflect the growing importance of anti-corruption discourse in Thai politics and popular media, as well as the growing scrutiny of Thaksin's government, Chuwit was named "Person of the Year" by *The Nation*, Thailand's leading English-language newspaper (Clark C. and A. Levy 2004).

The seeds of Anti-Thaksin sentiments were beginning to emerge amongst powerful elites who could no longer tolerate Thaksin's unchecked power and disruption of the elite pact set forth by the events of the late 1990s. As elite theories would predict, Thaksin's greedy consolidation of power alienated both military and business elites, effectively disrupting Thailand's relatively new elite pact and effectively paving the way for political instability. As a result, elites who felt that their interests were no longer represented began to gather their resources in preparation for a battle in the near future: the military reinstated old legacies into leadership positions, poised for

action when the right time came; while spurned business elites mobilized their money and capital to deploy smear campaigns against Thaksin's government. Political polarization loomed ahead with various elite groups ready to lead the opposition.

*Corruption: Bringing Anti-Thaksin Sentiments to Popular Society*

Thaksin not only made enemies among competing elites, but also amid large portions of civil society due to his corrupt government practices and blatant attempts to suppress public opposition. As corruption in the Thaksin administration increased, negative backlash from Thailand's growing middle class and leaders of civil society also increased. This growing disapproval follows with the logic of modernization theory, which suggests that modernization aids in democratic consolidation due to increases in political engagement and scrutiny from newly resourced-endowed middle and lower classes.

As Thaksin continued with his corrupt practices<sup>13</sup>, public disapproval and political instability also increased. The Thai public was unprecedentedly interested in and intolerant of government corruption due to their newly empowered political voice. However, Thaksin tried desperately to diminish the voice of civil society whenever possible, which further antagonized him in the eyes of the middle class. When radio programs aired reports criticizing Thaksin, many of them were taken off the air and covered up with claims of technical malfunction (Pasuk

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<sup>13</sup> In Thaksin's attempts to consolidate his power as prime minister, he was inclined to run a corrupt government. As discussed in the previous section, Thaksin did not shy away from nepotism or police brutality for personal gain. In addition to these corrupt measures, Thaksin worked to preemptively shield himself from the independent commissions designed by the 1997 constitution to keep the prime minister and his government in check. After Thaksin won the 2001 elections through relatively fair means, the original, highly interventionist Election Commission was completely replaced. Their successors were far less independent-minded and were rumored to favor the TRT party (Freedom House 2008). Thaksin also appointed new National Counter Corruption commissioners in 2003. In a twist of irony, these commissioners were found guilty of corruption themselves in 2005 for illegally raising their own salaries (News Article: Court Finds Thai Anti-Corruption Commission Corrupt 2005).

2009). Although print media is not directly funded by the state, the Thaksin administration ensured that all pro-government newspapers carried the bulk of state-funded advertising (Freedom House 2008). In terms of TV broadcasts, most of Thailand's free TV channels were already controlled directly by the government or army with the exception of ITV, Thailand's first public and independent TV channel. However, Thaksin was also able to gain control of ITV as well through company shares owned by Thaksin's family telecommunications company, Shin Corporation (Pasuk 2009).

When dealing with NGO and protest groups, Thaksin did what all of his predecessors had done before him: he violently suppressed them. This intolerance for opposition protests came as a surprise, since Thaksin initially appeared to be sympathetic to NGO demands during his campaigning for the 2001 election. However, once Thaksin's power was secure, this support was revealed to be purely strategic. In 2002, Thaksin ordered officials to forcibly dismantle a protest camp that demanded the restoration of the Pak Mun River by permanently opening the Pak Mun dam's water gates. Later that year, Thaksin also ordered the violent break up of what had been a peaceful protest against the construction of a natural gas pipeline (Pasuk 2009). Thaksin also publicly attacked the legitimacy of opposing NGOs and civil society groups, saying that NGOs were no longer necessary now that Thaksin's government had a direct relationship with the people of Thailand:

In the past Thailand never had a strong government that sincerely solved the problems of the poor. If there is no gap between the people and the government then the career-less people who work in these organizations and live off subsidies from overseas are out of a job...I have no interest in their absurd gatherings. Its just people looking to make a name for themselves with no purpose. – Thaksin Shinawatra (Pasuk 2009).

Thaksin also had to face a new form of opposition that previous regimes did not: the public intellectual. As result of Thailand's modernization, these intellectuals emerged during the

political crisis events of the 1990s as leaders of civil society. Similar to his strategy of attacking the relevance of NGO leaders, Thaksin sought to publicly discredit and insult the opinions of key public intellectuals. In response to remarks made by Thirayuth Boonmi, a leader of the 1973 student uprising, which pointed out the government's increasingly authoritarian tendencies, Thaksin said, "Whenever he's out of his library, he thinks it's time to scold people for fun...He likes to market himself. Don't pay too much attention, or our country will be filled with egos like this one" (News Article: Thaksin Goes Ballistic 2003).

In addition to these methods of control, suppression, and slander, Thaksin's government also attempted to block public opposition through legal means. Thaksin took advantage of Thailand's extensive libel laws to harass opposition into silence (Freedom House 2008). He also pursued the creation of new laws to prevent and control protests, ranging from increasing legislation to monitor the activities and finances of NGOs to drafting a new anti-terrorist law, which was broad enough to include most public dissent (Pasuk 2009).

While these attempts at silencing civil society may have helped suppress public knowledge of Thaksin's corruption in the short term, the mounting antagonism against these members of civil society served to galvanize the public further against Thaksin. As modernization theories would predict, Thailand's increased modernization was matched with a growing intolerance for corruption (including media censorship) as more of Thailand's population became politically engaged and informed due to the emergence and proliferation of new communication tools. Thaksin's attempts to censor and suppress leaders of civil society, only motivated them to seek more creative, fluid forms of communication, such as the Internet and local, low-powered community radio stations.

By 2006 the Internet in Thailand had exploded with an estimated 8.5 million regular users in 2006 (Ubonrat 2007). The Internet effectively provided civil society with a new expansive platform to rouse and spread national antagonism against Thaksin: dozens of anti-Thaksin blogs and websites emerged and radio shows streamed online podcasts whenever radio signals were blocked. After the Frequency Allocation for Radio, Television and Telecommunications Act was enacted in 2000<sup>14</sup>, numerous citizen groups also started their own local, low-power radio stations in communities all across Thailand (Ubonrat 2007). These local radio stations allowed information regarding Thaksin's corruption to reach lower middle class citizens, who did not have direct access to the Internet. The explosion of internet-based media and the sheer volume of local community radio stations would prove to be simply too prolific for the Thaksin administration to handle. Modernization had equipped civil society with the necessary tools for political dissonance. The nation-wide anti-Thaksin movement was poised to emerge, waiting only for a leader (Sondhi Limthongkul) to unite all the elite and civil society factions into one massive coalition.

It is also important to note that Thais supporting Thaksin would also go on to utilize these same modern communication tools (i.e. the internet and local community radio stations) to spread and organize their pro-Thaksin campaign. They also created websites and podcasts in support of their political benefactor. Thus, in the case of Thailand, modernization has a mixed result in the democratization process: it simultaneously empowered both middle and lower classes to be more political invested and engaged; however, it empowered them to stand in political opposition to one another. The middle class strictly follows the paradigm put forth by modernization theories in the sense that their political empowerment allowed them to be more

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<sup>14</sup> Officially allocates 20% of radio frequency to community media (Ubonrat 2007)

critical of Thaksin's corruption; furthermore, their increased ability to communicate allowed them to assert considerable pressure against Thaksin's government. On the other hand, the lower class also benefited from increased access to resources and modernized communication tools to sustain their political voice in support of Thaksin. From their point of view, Thaksin was not corrupt because he represented the plight of Thailand's majority. The resulting political hodgepodge of opinions from the Thai general public would ultimately prove to be detrimental to democratic consolidation: politically empowered and modernized middle and lower classes would clash in stark opposition, leading to unprecedented levels of political polarization.

*Strengthening Anti-Thaksin Sentiments: Growing Tensions and Political Polarization*

Although Thaksin was reelected in a landslide victory during the 2005 elections, the Anti-Thaksin movement began to take shape even in the face of his popularity with the poor rural masses. The political tensions in Thailand finally began to boil over in 2005 as Thaksin's critics became too extensive to fully suppress in the popular media. Sondhi Limthongkul, a Thai media mogul and elite businessman, took the lead by using various media resources to spread his disapproval of Thaksin's government. Originally a strong supporter of Thaksin, Sondhi began to spread Anti-Thaksin messages after his friend Viroj Nualkhair, CEO of state-owned Krung Thai Bank, was forced out of his position due to the bank's unsatisfactory loan returns (i.e. Thaksin was exercising his seemingly unlimited power, which insulted Sondhi – a fellow business elite). Sondhi used his media empire, consisting of daily and weekly papers, radio stations, a cable TV channel, and the third most popular website in the country to build Anti-Thaksin sentiments among Thailand's urban, middle class society. Thaksin attempted to shut these media sources down, cancelling Sondhi's popular TV program, *Muangthai Rai Sapda*, and temporarily shutting



down his TV channel. Thaksin also tried to silence Sondhi with legal bullying, filing for three separate defamation lawsuits. However, Sondhi continued to evade the government's grip over popular media by uploading his talk show to intermediary satellites abroad from which Thai cable providers could legally download his broadcasts (Pasuk 2009).

Appealing to the middle class, Sondhi focused on accusing Thaksin of corruption and power abuse. According to Thai historian Pasuk Phongpaicht, these accusations were "crowd pleasers," reflecting the population's growing intolerance of political corruption (Pasuk 2009: 254). Recognizing the importance of the King to all Thais, Sondhi added a royalist twist to his Anti-Thaksin campaign in hopes of broadening his support base. Sondhi brought to light a number of religious and monarchy-related controversies that attempted to paint Thaksin as a man who had become so engrossed in his own power that he no longer respected the Thai monarchy. A Sondhi-owned newspaper published a sermon written by a highly revered Buddhist monk that openly criticized Thaksin (News Article: Defamation Lawsuits 2005). Another Sondhi-owned new source ran an article that accused the Prime Minister of usurping the royal powers of the King by presiding over a sacred ceremony at the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, a privilege traditionally reserved for members of the Royal Family only (News Article: PM's Office Dismisses Report 2005). Sondhi used these events to tie royalist slogans (such as "We Fight for the King" or "Return Power to the King") to Anti-Thaksin sentiments, thereby equating support for Thaksin as disrespect for the King.

As a result of Sondhi's seemingly unstoppable attacks against Thaksin, Anti-Thaksin sentiments continued to grow as fears of retaliation from Thaksin diminished. Other media sources, such as *The Nation* and the *Bangkok Post*, also began to follow Sondhi's lead,

publishing more openly hostile stories. Attendance at Sondhi's Anti-Thaksin rallies also increased from 3,000 attendees in September to 80,000 in early December (Pasuk 2009).

However, support of Thaksin remained widespread and strong. The 2005 elections held on February 6<sup>th</sup> gave Thaksin a landslide victory: the TRT party won 374 seats out of 500 (For detailed election results by party and region see Table 2). TRT had effectively aggregated the constituencies of some of the other parties from the 2001 election, lowering political choice to only four parties: the TRT, the Democrats, the newly formed Muanchon and the Chart Thai party. With fewer political choices, Thailand's political climate was becoming more polarized between the massive TRT machine and the smaller anti-Thaksin constituencies attempting to desperately hold on to what little power they may have.

**Table 2: Election Results by Party and Region, February 2005. Source: Election Commission**

	North	Northeast	South	Center	Bangkok	Total	Party List	Grand Total
Thai Rak Thai	71 (93%)	126 (93%)	1 (2%)	80 (83%)	32 (86%)	310	67	377
Democrat	5 (7%)	2 (1.5%)	52 (96%)	7 (7%)	4 (11%)	70	26	96
Chat Thai	-	6 (4%)	1 (2%)	10 (10%)	1 (3%)	18	7	25
Mahachon	-	2 (1.5%)	-	-	-	2	-	2
Total	76	136	54	97	37	400	100	500

A deep divide was emerging in Thailand between pro-Thaksin Thais (consisting of the poor Northern masses that benefited from his populist campaigns and those business elites who were close to Thaksin) and Anti-Thaksin Thais (consisting of prominent scholars and urban middle-class who were critical of political corruption; various civil society groups and NGOs who were suppressed by Thaksin; royalists who believed Thaksin disrespected the King; factions of the Thai military who were insulted by Thaksin's nepotism; and powerful business and media

moguls who felt betrayed by Thaksin). The divide would prove to be an incredibly tense polarization as Pro-Thaksin Thais had the advantage of sheer number, while Anti-Thaksin Thais had more resource networks based in economic ties, media power, and aristocratic old elite power structures. Political Institutionalists would point to this political polarization as a primary reason for the apparent inconsistency of political institutionalist theories, which propose that parliamentary democracies are more likely to promote democratic stability. Because political polarization emerged, it follows that political instability and democratic breakdown would also occur regardless of democratic regime type.

It is important to note that although on the surface the political polarization was centered around the approval or disapproval of Thaksin's government, the mounting political tension was also representative of a deeper class struggle between the poor rural majority and the urban elite (new and old) and middle class minority. By adopting a populist platform, Thaksin was bringing to light a larger issue embedded deep within Thai societal structures: the oppression of the Northern poor masses. Unfortunately, Thaksin harnessed the political voice of the poor majority to run a corrupt government, thereby creating an easy opportunity for Thai elites to continue suppressing the voice of the rural poor. However, because of Thaksin's empowering attention to their well-being, the rural poor would not back down into submission as they did before. This deeper socio-economic struggle embedded in the Pro-Thaksin/Anti-Thaksin debate may explain why the polarization in Thailand became too unstable for a purely political solution.

*Democratic Breakdown: the Failure of Political Institutions Under the Weight of Polarization*

The democratic breakdown of 2006 confirms the more nuanced aspects of political institutionalist theories that identify political polarization and the absence of mutual dependency

between the prime minister and his legislature as secondary causal mechanisms for political instability and democratic breakdown.

With the landslide reelection of 2005, Thaksin began to act as though his power was unlimited. As Thai historian Pasuk Phongpaichit described, “Thaksin found himself in a more powerful position than any previous elected Thai premier. Three main factors contributed to this position: new features of the 1997 constitution; the scale of his electoral victory; and his personal popularity...” (Pasuk 2009: 94-95). Some of these constitutional provisions include measurements that were meant to prevent party switching, which was a common problem in previous Thai democratic regimes. Essentially, the prime minister had the power to dissolve parliament and call for new elections with 45 day’s notice; however electoral candidates had to have been members of their party for at least 90 days, making it difficult to bargain against the prime minister through threats of defection (Hicken 137). This made any opposition from the parliament completely ineffectual. Furthermore, opposing parties had too few seats to launch a no-confidence vote against the Prime Minister (White 2009). These provisions effectively removed the politically stabilizing mechanism of mutual dependency between the prime minister and legislature, creating the potential for political instability and democratic breakdown.

Thaksin’s seemingly unlimited power and the lack of legal checks and balances became apparent during the 2006 Shin Corporation scandal. This scandal was also the spark that sent Thailand into a spiral of deep political polarization – another secondary mechanism that supposedly leads to democratic breakdown according to political insitutionalists. In an example of Thaksin’s empowered audacity, the Shinawatra family sold its 49.6% share holdings of the Shin Corporation to Temasek, a Singapore telecommunications company on January 23, 2006. Thaksin organized the sale such that his family had a tax liability exemption and did not have to

pay a capital gains tax, provoking an explosion of public anger. The sale not only demonstrated Thaksin's tendency to abuse power for personal gain, it also reflected Thaksin's blatant disregard for some of the platforms he had built his election campaigns on: Thaksin's economic policies were built around the promise to protect and support Thai businesses and capitalism from foreign predators; however, with the Shin Corporation sale, Thaksin had now become responsible for the largest sell-off of Thai assets (net worth US\$1.7 billion) to foreign ownership in Thai history (Pasuk 2009).

Sondhi Limthongkul decided to use the Shin Corporation scandal to push his Anti-Thaksin movement further. On February 9<sup>th</sup>, the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) was formed as a political pressure group in favor of the removal of Thaksin and his government. With Sondhi pushing the group forward with his galvanizing rallies and media broadcasts, PAD quickly grew into a threatening coalition drawing from a wide social spectrum of urban middle class, business elites, old government officials, public intellectuals, members of the press and NGO leaders. Throughout February and March, PAD organized a series of massive demonstrations in Bangkok ranging from processions through the shopping center of the city to outright blockades on the Government House. Turnouts ranged in the thousands, with some news sources reporting numbers of up to 100,000 (News Article: Huge Rally Calls for Thai PM's Resignation 2006).

It is also important to note that during these demonstrations the military made a subtle, but important statement: they chose to do nothing. When Thaksin called for military intervention, the army chief, General Sonthi (a representative of the old military elites) refused on the grounds that the protests were "peaceful" and "historic in a global context" (Pasuk 2009: 270). This was an unprecedented decision for the military to make: as the events of the 1970s

and 1990s clearly demonstrate the military has a history of complete intolerance for political demonstrations. Their decision to allow the political protests to continue made a clear statement about where their loyalties were. Because the military was still unable to directly remove Thaksin from power themselves due to the residual legacy of the political crisis of the 1990s, the military chose to express their disapproval for Thaksin through *inaction* against Anti-Thaksin protestors. Effectively, the Anti-Thaksin movement had now spread to include not only members of civil society and spurned business elites, but also the military.

While Bangkok became increasingly hostile to Thaksin and his government, the prime minister was not completely shaken. He knew the rural poor masses would still remain loyal to their benefactor. In hopes of reasserting his legitimacy before the eyes of the public, Thaksin dissolved parliament on February 24<sup>th</sup> and called for another election in April. In the interim before the election, Thaksin's rural poor political base demonstrated their support for him through public rallies held in provincial centers in the north and northeast. In mid-March, some groups from the north and northeast, dubbed the "Caravans of the Poor," marched to Bangkok on foot to bring their political voice to the capital (Pasuk 2009). One Pro-Thaksin rally held at Sanam Luang, an open field and public square in front of the Grand Palace in Bangkok, attracted 200,000 supporters (News Article: Pro-Government Rally 2006).

With these numerous nation-wide protests coming from both anti-Thaksin and pro-Thaksin campaigns, political polarization was in full swing. The country was in a constant state of opposing political rallies and marches, each attracting thousands of attendees. The entire nation was embroiled in the political debate between yellow shirts (anti-Thaksin) and red shirts (pro-Thaksin). These political tensions finally culminated in the events surrounding the 2006 re-elections. In opposition to the declared snap election, the Democrat, Chat Thai, and Mahachon

parties announced they would boycott the election and refused to be listed on the ballots. The anti-Thaksin camp campaigned for people to select the “abstain” option on their ballots. However, these efforts were not enough to deny another TRT victory: the TRT gained 56% of the votes and kept their majority position in parliament. It is of further note that the 2006 election results showed a pattern of increasing geographic polarization: in the upper north and northeast, around 10% more people voted for TRT than in 2005; while TRT votes fell in urban areas by 24% in Bangkok and by 10-15% in provincial capitals elsewhere (Pasuk 2009).

According to these election results, the mounting Anti-Thaksin campaign was no match for the sheer size of Thaksin’s rural poor political base. However, PAD members refused to accept the results, claiming that most of the voters were uneducated people who were paid to vote. The magnitude and scope of the resulting public protests eventually demanded action from the Thai royalty. Keeping with the legacy of “the King as the ultimate arbiter of political power,” King Bhumibol organized a meeting with Thaksin on April 4<sup>th</sup>. In this meeting, the King pressured Thaksin to step down from his premiership. Thaksin obliged, saying he would not assume the position of Prime Minister once the Parliament came into session, but would continue to serve as “caretaker” Prime Minister in the interim (Pasuk 2009).

But this was not enough for the PAD or the Democrat party: they also petitioned to annul the results of the election on various legal grounds. Their attempts were successful as Thailand’s Constitutional Court eventually declared the election results invalid on grounds of voter privacy violation and corruption in the Election Commission (News Article: Constitution Court Invalidate the April Election 2006). A new election was scheduled for October 15<sup>th</sup>. However, in a twist of irony, both the TRT and Democrat parties were brought to court for malpractice leading up to the April poll on June 27<sup>th</sup> (Pasuk 2009). Political polarization had mounted to the

point that both parties had resulted to blatant illegal electoral practices that could not be ignored by the Constitutional Court. With both of Thailand's main political parties facing the risk of dissolution and the exposed corruption of the Election Commission, the fate of Thailand's parliamentary system was dangerously unclear. However, it had become apparent that the current democratic venues for legitimate political change had crumbled in the face of the current political crisis. As political institutionalists would predict, Thailand's democratic institutions had essentially disintegrated under the weight of intense "winner-take-all" political polarization during election time. An intervention of some sort had become necessary: Thai democracy no longer had the potential to rectify itself.

After 15 years of maintaining a low profile, the military became active again in the face of the political murkiness and instability. On September 19th, 2006, General Sonthi Boonyaratglin led a bloodless coup against Thaksin who was in New York at the time. Within hours of the coup, the King gave the coup leaders his blessings. This approval from the King effectively revoked the Monarch's previous decision in the 1990s to remove the military from Thai politics (Hewison 2008). This royal approval once again highlights the importance of elite pacts in the realm of Thai politics: as previously noted, the military did not allow itself to forcibly remove Thaksin even though they were clearly unsatisfied with his power consolidation. The military had to wait for the King's approval. There is evidence that the royal palace began supporting the coup planners even before September. Planning for the coup had begun six months earlier (during the height of the Shin Corporation scandal) and was led by some of the King's closest advisors, such as president of the King's Privy Council General Prem Tinsulanonda. Other coup leaders included General Sonthi, General Saprang, and General Anupong Paochinda, military men who had old elite legacies tied to the place (Pasuk 2009;



Hewison 2008). After the coup, the coup-leaders formed themselves into a council (the Council of National Security) with General Sonthi as the head. They then proceeded to dissolve the Cabinet, parliament and Constitutional Court, imposed martial law, banned all political activity, and reshuffled the military such that Thaksin's personal network of cadet classmates were removed from power. Effectively, the military had taken advantage of the country's political instability to regain complete power and control over Thailand's political institutions. With the King's approval, military influence over Thailand's political system had returned.

Initially the coup was widely welcomed in the capital: people reportedly came out to congratulate the soldiers, offer them flowers and have pictures taken with a tank (Pasuk 2009). It was seen as a necessary action that was required to restore the legitimacy of Thai politics; however, as future events would demonstrate, the new government would attempt to revert back to old power systems and political structures. The military would go on to pass legislation, undermining the capacity of political parties and elected leaders to challenge Thailand's old elite forces (Hicken 2007). The new constitution, which was drafted by a military-appointed committee, reinstated power in the hands of select few. Only half of the Senate was elected while the other half was appointed. The judiciary was also strengthened, as high-ranking judges (who were often times members of the old aristocratic elites) became part of the appointment committees for the Senate, the Election Commission, and other government agencies. As Vitit Muntarbhorn writes in his deconstruction of the new constitution, "The new Constitution reaffirms the central role of the monarchy in the constitutional process...Clearly, given the circumstances giving birth the new Constitution, the march towards democracy is managed directly or indirectly by the ruling elite" (Vitit 2009). The trial period for a "people's democracy" had ended.

### *Chapter Conclusions*

In essence, these events demonstrate the importance of examining all of the mechanisms put forth by elite theorists, political institutionalists and modernization theorists in understanding the most recent breakdown of democracy in Thailand. Anti-Thaksin sentiments emerged primarily from the leadership of spurned elites, confirming the importance of elite disunity in fostering political instability. If Thaksin had not alienated and antagonized elites in both the military and rising business-billionaire class, key players such as Sondhi Limthongkul and General Sonthi Boonyaratglin would not have been present to galvanize the middle class into action or to protect Anti-Thaksin protestors from retaliation.

Although political institutionalist theories would at first seem inconsistent with Thailand's democratic breakdown, examining the details of the breakdown would reveal the presence of key secondary causal mechanisms that political institutionalists had identified as causes for breakdown (i.e. Thailand is a unique case in which a parliamentary democracy does not guarantee the absence of these secondary causal mechanisms). These secondary causal mechanisms were independence between the executive body and the legislative body and political polarization. Mechanisms in the 1997 Constitution allowed Thaksin to gain considerable power over his parliament, eliminating the stabilizing element of mutual dependence between the executive and legislative bodies. Furthermore, because of Thaksin's actions and policies, Thailand witnessed intense political polarization that created a heated environment during election times, as exemplified by the 2006 election disputes. This polarization was too deeply divided that it destabilized Thai politics and ultimately, unraveled Thailand's parliament in 2006.

Similarly, modernization theories would also seem inconsistent with the case of Thailand; however, in reality the secondary causal mechanisms for democratic stabilization, i.e. increased political empowerment, were present, but were unfortunately complicated by preexisting tensions between different socio-economic classes. As economic prosperity spread to both the middle and lower classes, their desire to be politically engaged and involved did increase. However, the newly politically engaged civilians were not unified in their demand for legitimate democracy. Because of preexisting inequalities “legitimate democracy” came to mean something different between the middle and lower classes. The middle class, who had received their economic prosperity through their own means, stood in opposition to Thaksin and joined forces with the old and new Thai elites to protect democracy from Thaksin’s authoritarian-like control and corruption. But the poor had received their economic prosperity through the grace of Thaksin’s populist policies and therefore associated fair democracy as Thaksin continuing to stay in power to serve the poor majority. So in the case of Thailand, the modernization secondary mechanisms of increased political voice had the opposite effect of democratic stabilization and instead added to the intense political polarization witnessed in Thailand. Thus, political empowerment caused by modernization by itself is not a sufficient element for the establishment of a stable legitimate democracy, because it can be complicated by the nuances of how different socio-economic classes modernize.

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## **Thesis Conclusion**

Thailand has struggled for over 80 years to strike a stable balance between old traditions of absolute monarchy and modern promises of popular democracy. Since the revolution of 1932, which removed power from the monarchy, various Thai elite factions have struggled to fill the void of the king's power. Elite disunity has resulted in 17 separate constitutions and charters. In times of political stability, the regime in power tended to be a sham democracy controlled by military elites. However, there have been three moments of popular democracy in Thailand. The most successful was a result of the political crisis of the 1990s. This period was marked by the emergence of a new elite group, the Thai business elites, which further complicated the competition between the older generation of Thai elites. After the initial struggle between the new and old elite groups, Thailand stabilized and produced the 1997 constitution, which formalized the political institutions necessary for a legitimate popular democracy that was free from military control. However, less than 10 years later, the political institutions set forth by the constitution were hijacked to support the premiership of Thaksin Shinawatra, a corrupt Thai business elite. Thaksin's administration was so controversial and polarizing that the country fragmented into two polarized factions. The country was so divided that the King moved to support a military coup to restore stability, thereby ending Thailand's longest period of liberal democracy.

In my attempts to disentangle the details of this complex history of cyclic democratic regime breakdown, I employed three theoretical frameworks rooted in political institutions, elite group divergence, and socio-economic development.

In summary, political institutionalists propose that the type of democratic institutions established at the onset of the political regime will influence the stability of that regime. More specifically, they argue that due to the presence of certain secondary mechanisms (i.e. mutual dependence between the legislative and executive bodies, and more proportional representation across political parties to avoid polarization), parliamentary democracies are more likely to promote stable democracies. When applied to the case of Thailand, the primary mechanism of regime type seems incongruent with the country's repeated breakdowns; however, upon further examination, the secondary mechanisms associated with a parliamentary democracy were not present and political polarization was allowed to ensue.

Elite theorists associate political regime instability with dis-unified elite groups competing for power. They propose that regime stability is dependent on the formation of elite pacts. In other words, when competing elite factions form agreements amongst themselves, political stability can be achieved. This framework was crucial in understanding all of Thailand's political regime changes beginning with the revolution of 1932.

Modernization theories suggest that there is a correlation between socio-economic development and democratic consolidation. More specifically, these theories predict that economic development results in increases in economic and social security for lower classes. This sense of security allows more of the population to be less receptive to exploitative political agendas and corruption. In the case of Thailand, modernization theories would also seem to be inconsistent at first; however, the unique circumstances of the political situation during the 2006

breakdown may have complicated the proposal that modernization prevents political instability. In fact, the 2006 breakdown seems to support Huntington's proposal that modernization fosters instability and conflict.

These general conclusions were derived from an in-depth analysis of Thailand's history beginning with the revolution of 1932 and ending with the latest democratic regime breakdown in 2006. More specifically, I found that from 1932 to the late 1980s, the political regime changes were primarily the result of elite disunity between competing factions, as elite theorists hypothesize. This "traditional Thai politics" revolved around three elite factions: the military elites, the royalists, and the liberal civilian elites. However, the most recent democratic consolidation and breakdown implicates the presence of other mechanisms relating to conflicts between socio-economic classes and the failure of political institutions to appropriately address these conflicts.

In short, democratic consolidation occurred in the 1990s as a result of an alliance between the new business elites and the new middle class, representing a confluence of both elite and modernization theories. On the other hand, democratic breakdown occurred in the 2000s as a result of political polarization between the poor rural masses and an alliance between the old elites, new elites, and urban middle class. Due to Thaksin's populist policies, the divide between party affiliations mirrored the divide between socio-economic classes (i.e. the have-nots vs. the haves). Thaksin strategically exploited the socioeconomic divide to amass power amongst the rural poor masses, effectively bringing political attention to and amplifying the divide to extreme levels. The rural poor were pitted against a temporary alliance between military elites, business elites and the middle class. Political polarization mounted until a breakdown finally occurred in 2006, when the twisted nature of Thailand's parliamentary institutions crumbled under the weight



of political polarization. In summary, political institutionalist secondary mechanisms (polarization and the corruption of parliamentary institutions) were the direct causal mechanisms that led to the 2006 breakdown; while, modernization and elite mechanisms played an indirect role by producing and amplifying the political polarization that ultimately tore the nation apart.

These conclusions can be used to assess the strength of some of the primary democratization theories in political science. By grounding my historical process tracing in political institutionalist, elite, and modernization theories, my empirical analysis can serve as an important case study in exposing how these theories play out in real-world contexts. By applying these theories to complex cases, such as Thailand, the strengths, gaps and limitations of these theories can be brought to light.

More specifically, my empirical analysis has demonstrated that the mechanisms identified by elite theories (i.e. elite unity and elite disunity) were applicable in understanding all of Thailand's political regime changes. This suggests that in cases with deep political histories of elite dominance, the competition between various elite groups will continue to affect political stability even as the country modernizes. On the other hand, mechanisms identified by modernization theories (i.e. increasing the political voice of middle and lower classes) seem to have a mixed effect in promoting democratic consolidation and breakdown. During the democratic consolidation of the 1990s, modernization played a key role in bringing legitimate democracy to Thailand. However, in the 2006 breakdown, modernization only aided in amplifying the political polarization that ultimately destroyed Thailand's nascent democratic institutions. This suggests that while modernization mechanisms are necessary to promote democratic consolidation, they are not sufficient to guarantee political stability. When assessing the strength of political institutionalist theories, I find that secondary mechanisms associated

with democratic breakdown (i.e. political polarization and the corruption of parliamentary institutions) are in fact present during the 2006 breakdown, effectively explaining the apparent inconsistency regarding political institutionalist's primary causal mechanism (i.e. democratic regime type). This suggests that in order to strengthen political institutionalist theory, more research and analysis should be done to understand why and how the secondary mechanisms associated with democratic breakdown can still emerge even in a parliamentary democracy.

My empirical analysis can also offer key insights into Thailand's democratization process. By framing Thai history within the context of these theories, my analysis presents clear causal chains that better clarify Thailand's various setbacks and breakthroughs. In other words, by tracing certain mechanisms and how they interact with one another to promote democratic breakdown or consolidation, my thesis offers a clearer picture of Thai history. These theoretically-rooted causal chains help to explain why certain periods were marked by earnest attempts for democracy, while others were marked by political turmoil and democratic breakdown.

In the following sections, I summarize in greater detail my research and theoretical conclusions regarding the democratic consolidation of the 1990s and the democratic breakdown in 2006. I then conclude the chapter with opportunities for future research.

### *Democratic Consolidation: Elites and the Middle Class*

The democratic consolidation of the 1990s can be traced back to the unprecedented economic growth of the 1980s. From this economic prosperity, a new elite group of Thai businessmen emerged to challenge traditional elite power structures. Building networks of power in the Thai provinces, these new elites slowly infiltrated what had previously been a Bangkok-elite

parliamentary government. Sensing the presence of a new competitor, the dominant military elite group was poised to strike. When Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan, a former army general, began to show signs of his increasing loyalty to the business elites, army General Suchinda Kraprayoon staged a coup in February 1991. However, this coup, which was the military elite's attempt to reassert control over the Thai polity, would prove to be too late. Modernization and socio-economic development had also produced and strengthened another new socio-economic class: the Thai middle class. Picking up from where they had left off in the 1970s the larger, stronger middle class organized a series of protests against Suchinda's illegitimate rise to power. Intellectuals and civil society leaders who had lived through the student-revolution of the 1970s revived themselves and formed the Campaign for Popular Democracy (CPD). On May 17<sup>th</sup>, 1992, the CPD organized a massive rally consisting of middle class Thais protesting against the military and in solidarity with their fellow civilian business elites. Although, this protest ended in violence the massive demonstration could not be ignored. King Bhumibol, recognizing a moment of political instability, assumed his role as arbiter of political power structures. He called for a new political order that placed military elites and business elites on an equal playing field. To fully codify this new arrangement, the 1997 constitution was passed, establishing a Senate and National Assembly that were both open for direct election, thus removing the military's guaranteed influence through appointed parliamentary positions. Thai democracy was finally established such that the military elites would have to compete with the business elites in an equal and legitimate manner.

This process of democratic consolidation confirms the importance of examining the causal mechanisms put forth by both elite theories and modernization theories. With the introduction of a new elite class, previous elite power structures were disrupted, causing political

regime breakdown as witnessed by the coup of 1991. However, modernization mechanisms regarding the role of a politically galvanized middle class would converge with the plight of the new business elites, pushing the arbitration of a new, stable elite pact. Both the elite mechanism of a formal elite pact and the modernization mechanism of a politically active middle class were necessary in promoting the emergence of a nascent democracy. Without the large-scale protests of the modernized middle class, the business elites would continue to clash with the military. And without the elite businessmen, the middle class alone would not be able to pose a serious threat to military rule.

*Democratic Breakdown: Political Polarization between Socio-Economic Classes*

During Thailand's experimental period with participatory democracy, the Thai political scene witnessed the rise of an incredibly polarizing political figure. Thaksin Shinawatra, a billionaire businessman, took advantage of the new 1997 constitution to amass more political power than the constitution's drafters could have imagined. By appealing to Thailand's northern rural poor masses with his populist policies and promises of protectionist economics, Thaksin effectively harnessed what had previously been an untapped reserve of political supporters. With this massive support base, Thaksin quickly and fairly rose to the premiership in 2001. However, his time as Prime Minister was used to centralize power under Thaksin's own personal networks. He disrupted the delicate elite pact that had been established after the political crisis of the late 1990s by threatening the autonomy of the military with nepotistic appointments. Thaksin also utilized a national "War on Drugs and other Dark Influences" campaign to eliminate and threaten the business elites that posed a potential threat to his growing influence. This in effect increased his enemies amongst old and new elite groups. He also created enemies in civil society by

attempting to silence any and all critics. This became increasingly difficult as Thailand's corruption-critical middle class continued to grow with Thailand's flourishing economy. In a structural process similar to the political crisis of the late 1990s, elites who were dissatisfied with the current power structure (i.e. a power structure that only championed Thaksin's personal networks) joined together with a politically empowered middle class to revolt against the current government.

However, an added element that was not present during the political crisis of the late 1990s was political polarization. Thaksin's populist policies had an unprecedented side effect: they empowered and inspired the lower classes to have a political voice. These lower classes saw Thaksin as their benefactor and refused to lose him to what they perceived as old elite groups trying to reclaim power. Pro-Thaksin/Anti-Thaksin sentiments intensified along these socio-economic divides and as a result, created an unparalleled level of political instability and unrest as both sides held massive protests and rallies. This mounting political tension resulted in a complete unraveling of Thailand's parliament in 2006. The king and the military took this as a demonstration of the danger and instability of democracy and seized this opportunity to reclaim power and to reinstate traditional Thai politics.

Unlike the political regime breakdowns of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the breakdown in 2006 involved the participation of new socio-economic classes and political polarization between different parties. Elite theories still remain an important dimension in this breakdown, as Anti-Thaksin sentiments emerged primarily from the leadership of spurned elites in both the military and business elite groups. For example, if Thaksin had not antagonized individuals like Sondhi Limthongkul and General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, neither the founder of the People's Alliance for

Democracy (the nation's premiere Anti-Thaksin group) nor its military protector would have emerged.

Political institutionalist theories also help disentangle this democratic breakdown. Although the 1997 constitution established a parliamentary democracy, key mechanisms were not present in practice, thereby increasing the likelihood for Thai democracy to breakdown regardless of regime type. These key mechanisms, which are identified as secondary causal mechanisms by political institutionalists, were independence between the executive and legislative branches and political polarization. Certain measures in the 1997 constitution left the space for Thaksin to amass power over his parliament, thereby eliminating the stabilizing mechanism of mutual dependence that is usually found in parliamentary democracies. Thaksin also galvanized intense political polarization through his populist policies and corrupt practices. This polarization escalated during election time in 2006, effectively destabilizing Thai politics until the whole legislative system unraveled.

Modernization theories are also a key dimension in understanding the breakdown of 2006. While the secondary mechanisms of increased political voice and intolerance for political corruption were present amongst the general population, complications arose due to preexisting tensions between different socio-economic classes. Due to Thaksin's populist policies, Thai civilians were divided between the urban middle class who wanted Thaksin ousted due to his corrupt policies and the rural lower class who wanted Thaksin to stay in power to represent their political interests. Both of these civilian classes had become empowered and invested in participating in the shaping of their government (which is good for democracy): the middle class gained political voice as a result of their increasing economic resources, while the marginalized rural poor were gifted a political voice through Thaksin's populist policies. Because these

socioeconomic classes gained political voice through different processes of modernization, their conceptions of legitimate democracy were divided (which led to intense political polarization): the middle class, which gained political voice through their own private means, were critical of Thaksin's government; while the rural poor, which gained political voice because of Thaksin, wanted to keep their benefactor in power. Thus, in the case of Thailand, the mechanisms proposed by modernization seem to have a mixed effect in promoting stable democracy. In the short term, because the middle class sided with the elites, they unwittingly made way for a return to a military-controlled democracy. However, it remains to be seen if these same modernization mechanisms of increased political involvement from the general population will prevail to achieve democratic consolidation in the long run. The divides between Pro-Thaksin poor and Anti-Thaksin middle class Thais may fall, and the politically empowered middle and lower classes may unite, giving way to a new revival of a "people's democracy."

### *The Future of Democracy in Thailand*

In conclusion, political institutionalist theories were correct in their identification of destabilizing secondary mechanisms, such as political polarization and the lack of mutual dependence between the executive and legislative branches; however, the conditions under which these secondary mechanisms can arise even within a parliamentary democracy are yet to be clearly defined. Were there structural nuances present in the type of political institutions established that could have predicted Thaksin's ability to manipulate and polarize the Thai polity and general populace even within a parliamentary democracy?

Elite theories were also correct in their identification of the importance of elite competition for power, especially in the case of Thailand. As a country with deep traditions and

social hierarchies, competition between elite groups is an important dimension in understanding moments of stability and instability in Thai political history. These considerations applied to both the democratic consolidation in the 1990s and the democratic breakdown of the 2000s. However, as Thailand continues to develop and modernize, the usefulness of only considering elite groups will diminish. As the general public gains power through popular media, political empowerment and sheer size, will elite pacts continue to matter?

Modernization theories remain the most puzzling when applied to the case of Thailand. It is unclear whether or not modernization and socio-economic development help promote democratic consolidation in Thailand or assist in exacerbating divides between different socio-economic classes. During the democratic consolidation of the 1990s, modernization theories clearly added to the stabilization of democracy, as economic and social development produced new socio-economic classes (i.e. the business elites and the middle class) that could challenge the military elites in a way that prior elite groups could not. However, during the democratic breakdown in 2006, modernization and development seemed to simultaneously promote and destabilize democracy.

Because of Thaksin, the meaning of a legitimate democracy came to signify different things to lower and middle classes. To the rural poor, it meant that as Thailand's population majority they had the right to choose whomever they wanted to be prime minister of Thailand. To the urban middle class, it meant avoiding corruption and covert authoritarian power. And as a result of this divide, the middle class unknowingly aided in condemning the country to fall back into a military-controlled democracy by siding with the business elites, military elites and conservative royalists. Modernization played a role in this division because it empowered both the middle and lower class to become politically involved and active. Without these massive



populations, the country would not have polarized and fragmented so deeply; in other words, the political dispute between Thaksin and the other elites would have remained an elite dispute similar to all the other regime breakdowns of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

However, it still remains unclear if the 2006 breakdown was merely a side step in what is a longer march towards democracy. Especially in light of the recent reinstatement of military influence and control and the consequent political crises of 2008 and 2010, it would be interesting to examine whether or not those middle class Thais who opposed Thaksin due to his corrupt policies have changed their loyalties. In other words, how has the Pro-Thaksin/Anti-Thaksin divide, which has now evolved into the Red shirt vs. Yellow shirt divide, changed over time? By examining these nuances, the relationship between increases in political voice in the general population and democratic stabilization can be better understood. Will the middle and lower class, unite their political voices to demand a popular democracy free of elitist structures as Thailand continues to modernize and develop? Or will their political voices continue to stay fragmented, keeping polarization at dangerous levels and allowing elite factions to continue fighting with each other for political power?