Public Opinion and Political Power in Thailand

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September 2008
The 2006 military coup that felled the government of Thaksin Shinawatra was disillusioning to those who believed that consolidated democracy had brought an end at last to Thailand’s chronic political instability. Citing the pretext of “corruption”, the military disregarded the government’s electoral mandate and took control, thereby squandering the progress achieved through fifteen years of true democracy. Just five months before the coup, polling data indicated high levels of support not only for the government itself, but also for the democratic model. The closer examination of the polling data presented in this paper reveals, however, that not all segments of Thai society supported democracy with equal fervor. Specifically, Bangkok residents favored non-democratic intervention if faced with a challenge to their traditional leadership role in Thai politics. The contrasting attitudes of Bangkok and non-Bangkok residents with respect to democracy lend further support to the theory that Thailand is a “tale of two democracies”: the analysis presented here demonstrates a fundamental cleavage between urban Bangkok and the country’s rural areas.
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The overthrow of an elected, democratic government by a military coup in Thailand raises questions concerning the use of public opinion polls for estimating democratic consolidation. This analysis probes more deeply into data from polls taken in 2005, and, more recently, as late as April 2006. The results indicate that Bangkok residents are more likely to support alternatives to democracy when perceiving a threat to traditional political hegemony posed by rural, populist governments. The data offer persuasive support for the concept of Thailand as “two democracies” and offer clues as to some origins of the coup.

The East Asia Barometer survey conducted in Thailand during April 2006, once again indicated extraordinarily high levels of support for democracy on virtually all measures. Furthermore, the poll revealed corresponding, overwhelming satisfaction with the government of Thaksin Shinawatra. On September 19, however, tanks moved into Bangkok, and a military junta replaced what, [had become] virtually one of the most democratic nations in the world.

A series of events foretold the coup for those who are sensitive to the intricacies of Thai politics. A series of speeches by Prem Tinsulanonoda, spokesman for the Privy Council, and, thus, the voice of the king, indirectly chastised developments within the government, but, more importantly, in speeches to various military groups, reminded military officers that the military belonged to the king, not the government. A visit by General Songthi to the palace preceded the mobilization of the military to take over the government, to replace the...
Prime Minister, and to abrogate the Constitution of 1997. This was followed by immediate approval of the coup by the monarch. As one Thai scholar put it, “If the king didn’t give a nod, this never would have been possible.”

This startling turn in the history of an on-going struggle for democracy in Thailand raises serious issues for the study of democratic consolidation, especially in a comparative context. Celebration of the “era of democracy” or the “third wave” of democracy has become tempered by concerns about the ability of democracies to survive. Distinctions between “semi-democracies” and “democracies” - or even “polyarchies” - have become less significant than their “consolidation” or persistence (Diamond and Plattner, 2001). As with the concept of democracy, the concept of “consolidation” is trenchantly debated. Linz and Stepan define a “consolidated democracy” as one in which: 1) no national, social, economic, or institutional constituencies attempt to create a non-democratic regime or secede from the state; 2) a strong majority of public opinion believes that democratic institutions and procedures are the most appropriate way to govern, even in the face of major economic problems or dissatisfaction with incumbents; 3) governmental and nongovernmental groups accept the control of laws, procedures, and institutions created through democratic processes (2001, 95). The first and third of these conditions are virtually truisms (or at least definitional). The condition on which most scholars who utilize public opinion rely is support in public opinion for democratic governance. While this may be a necessary condition for democratic consolidation, it is clearly not a sufficient condition in the Thai case.

If public support for democracy does not determine democratic persistence, what do indices of support for democracy mean in mass publics and, particularly, across nations? Developments in Thailand indicates that overwhelming support for democracy among peoples of developing nations does not guarantee democratic governments in the face of determined elites who have access to instruments of military power. The military, after fifteen years of true democracy, overturned
the democratically-elected government on the pretext of “corruption in government.” Whether “corruption” warranted such a drastic remedy has yet to be proven, but what is clear is that Thai elites are still willing to sacrifice democracy when they find control of government slipping from their grasp. For the time being, they are willing to tolerate a ban on all political activities, including meetings of political parties, assemblies of more than five people, and restrictions on the news media – specifically a ban on criticism of the regime and other possible censorship, all measures that far exceed actions for which the Thaksin regime was severely criticized. Now, the source of funds for the so-called People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD), Sondhi Limtongkul, argues that suppression of individual rights should be acceptable in order to rid the government of all remaining vestiges of the Thaksin regime. In the face of determined elite opposition to mass democracy, what does it mean to generate indicators of mass support for democratic processes and practices, and, more importantly, what is the significance of comparing opinions regarding democracy in nations formerly ruled by authoritarian regimes?

The Rest of the Story

Clues indicating “disillusionment” with democracy among middle and upper-class elites are present in polls taken in 2005, and the EAB poll taken in 2006. The data, however, tend to contradict some previous findings of theory in comparative analysis, and a deeper examination of these empirical data produces perspectives at odds with much of the existing literature.

One place to begin is the study of support for democracy, authoritarian alternatives to democratic government, and other

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1 Much is always made of the distribution of money during elections. There is, however, no hard evidence that such practices change election outcomes.
dimensions of adherence to democratic values. A glance at support for authoritarian alternatives to democracy clearly indicates high levels of rejection of these alternatives by large majorities. Some scholars attempt to measure the balance between support for democracy and support for authoritarian alternatives by computing a net balance between support for democracy and support for authoritarian alternatives. Table 1 (See Appendix), however, presents a factor analysis of relevant indicators of these concepts, showing that these concepts are orthogonal, that is, totally independent of each other; any combination of the two concepts by mathematical operations is spurious and misleading.

A novel concept also emerges from the factor analysis. The strongest factor, Factor 1, clearly represents commitments to political equally applied, especially, to minority populations. Attitudes toward political equality for minorities are often missing from national polls, but the EAB data indicate that this dimension is the strongest dimension of democratic values in Thailand. Table 1 thus produces three dimensions of attitudes toward democracy indicating cleavages in the Thai electorate contributing to the downfall of democratic government in 2007.

Role of Education in Support of Democratic Values

A considerable body of scholarship argues that education contributes to support for democratic values (Dalton and Shinn, 2007; Rohrschneider, 1999; Rose, Haerpfer, and Mishler, 1998), even in East Asian nations (Shin, 1999; Chu and Chang, 2001). Table 2 presents regressions estimating effects of education in promoting the values identified in Table 1. The results, however, show that education either has no significant impact on promotion of democracy or, in one dimension, significant negative impacts; more highly educated people are less likely to support political equality for minorities than persons of lower educational levels. The data thus indicate that education does not necessarily promote democratic values and, in some respects, works against development of democratic values of political equality.
Why is education not associated with democratic values in Thailand as scholars have found in other areas of the world? One answer is that these studies tend to equate education with growth in liberal democratic values as a result, presumably, of learned awareness of benefits of civic virtue to societies. There is, however, another interpretation. Education (in Thailand, at least) is, primarily, an indicator of social status. Previous studies show that income, education, and occupational status tend to load on a single natural factor indicating socioeconomic status, rather than civic values (Albritton and Bureekul, 2005). In Thailand, educational status is almost solely a function of family income status. This interpretation implies that when examining the role of education in contributing to democratic values, scholars in Thailand are often observing values based upon social class, rather than civic values acquired through education. Furthermore, upper-status attitudes clearly provide a context for opposition to populist regimes, such as the one overturned in the 2006 coup.

Table 3 makes these attitudes more explicit in an analysis of how education and populist values contribute to support for Prime Minister Thaksin, the leader of the government overturned in the 2006 coup. First, the data indicate that education appears to have no significance for valuing the [roles to be played in politics] of people with lower levels of education. The data also show, conversely however, that people who supported Thaksin tend to support the involvement of persons in politics with little or no education. The populist orientations...
of Thaksin supporters begin to emerge in this additional perspective on the data.

**Table 3: Roles of Education and Support for Thaksin Shinawatra on Attitudes Toward Rights of Less Educated Citizens: OLS Analysis  N = 1300**

“People with little or no education should have as much say in politics as highly educated people.”

**Equation 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Regression Coefficient</th>
<th>t-test</th>
<th>Sig. of t</th>
<th>R-square</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>.0040</td>
<td>.386</td>
<td>.699</td>
<td>.097</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with the Thaksin government</td>
<td>.0991</td>
<td>3.490</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Equation 2: (Dependent Variable is Satisfaction with the Thaksin Government)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Regression Coefficient</th>
<th>t-test</th>
<th>Sig. of t</th>
<th>R-square</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-.0661</td>
<td>-6.600</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People with little or no education should have as much say in politics as highly educated people</td>
<td>.0938</td>
<td>3.490</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data also reveal that the role of education has what might be a significant indirect effect on attitudes toward persons of lower socioeconomic status. Table 3 shows a substantial negative relationship between levels of education and support for the Thaksin regime. By contrast, supporters of the role of less educated people in politics are significantly positive toward the Thaksin government. The question then becomes a choice of interpretations. Either education has no impact on populist attitudes toward participation of less-educated people in politics, or there is an indirect link in which opposition to the Thaksin regime has indirect effects on attitudes toward participation of less-educated citizens in politics and government. In the Thai case, at
least, education remains primarily a measure of socioeconomic status, and popular support for Thaksin in most of the areas outside Bangkok challenges the existing dominance of socioeconomic status elites represented by higher educational levels.

Dalton and Shin (2007: 93-4) offer a context for understanding this phenomenon: “People seek freedom and rights, but it is more difficult to openly extend these rights to one’s opponents. Elections and a fair judiciary are positive values until one’s party loses an election or an electoral appeal.” The decline in ability of elites, specifically including intellectual elites, to influence government behavior engendered a sense of threat to the place of Bangkok as the core society and culture defining the Thai nation, as well as to their role in guiding the nation.2

The Two Democracies Thesis

The political conflict in Thailand, at the least, represents a resurrection of the “two democracies” thesis that essentially pits the politics of Bangkok against rural populations. Polls, taken in 2005 and 2006, indicated growing divisions between urban and rural populations on some of the most fundamental social and political dimensions. Post-coup reports on the financial situations faced by farmers in the Northeast underline growing tensions between rural areas and the Bangkok metropole, since the current regime returned control of the government to traditional dominance by Bangkok elites with little concern for adversities in the hinterland.

What are the sources of the differences between urban and rural society that also happen to have significant impacts on attitudes toward democracy and democratic government? People living in rural areas live a significantly more precarious existence. Their livelihood is

2 These elite attitudes come from historical orientations of Thailand as a “kingdom” rather than as a “nation.” Threats to the preeminence of Bangkok, through elections or otherwise, represent a threat to the kingdom, itself.
constantly threatened by nature and they are exposed to lack of personal security in a significantly more anarchic society. This leads to a greater dependence upon social networks, including government, for “getting by” in life and, as in almost any society, rural dwellers are significantly more communal, as well as being interested in the welfare of their neighbors (which can be either positive or negative, from some perspectives). This communalism in rural areas also leads to higher levels of trust in other citizens, as well as higher levels of trust in government.

Urban dwellers live in an environment in which they are more autonomous, isolated, and individualistic, relishing the anonymity presented by urban life – all characteristics of what may be described as a “modernistic” culture. For these urbanites, individual independence from society and government leads to a greater interest in protections from government interference that scholars often associate with what are generally described as “civil liberties.” These divergences between urban and rural populations appear to have significant impacts on how democracy is viewed by individuals living in these two contexts, rural dwellers opting for security and urban dwellers for freedom. It is important to note, however, that virtually all societies celebrate rural culture so that it persists long after populations become urbanized. Bangkok residents, in general, appear to have little appreciation for the exigencies of rural life that lead to populist demands for policies that have direct benefits for rural society.3

In the Thai context, scholars have noted disparities in approaches to democracy based upon class or status, as well as urban-rural cleavages within society (Albritton and Bureekul, 2005), but Anek Laothamatas (1996) suggests that the most fundamental cleavage operating in Thai democracy is the sharp differences in political

3 In this study we associate Bangkok with “urban” cultures. Bangkok is a city of over 8 million people; the next largest city in Thailand is, roughly, 200,000. Other cities exhibit few of the dynamics of urban society associated with metropolitan life.
cultures between Bangkok and the essentially rural hinterland. Thailand is a “tale of two democracies”: one, of sophisticated urban elites (with origins or current residency in Bangkok), the other rural, often isolated parochial interests that view political activity, especially elections, as opportunities for personal gain in a Downsian sense (Downs, 1967). Among other differences between urban and rural constituencies is that (according to the “urban” view):


Voting in farming areas is not guided by political principles, policy issues, or what is perceived to be in the national interest, all of which is (regarded as) the only legitimate rationale for citizens casting their ballots in a democratic election. The ideal candidates for rural voters are those who visit them often, address their immediate grievances effectively, and bring numerous public works to their communities (202).

The ability of rural constituencies to acquire substantial political power in the parliament under conditions of electoral democracy often leads to doubts among members of the middle class, the upper class, the mass media, and even academics as to the efficacy of the democratic process. For these groups, “democracy turns out to be the rule of the corrupt and incompetent” (Laothamatas, 208). This puts them in a dilemma: although they oppose authoritarian rule in principle, they hold representatives from rural constituencies in contempt, regarding them as “parochial in outlook, boorish in manner, and too uneducated to be competent lawmakers or cabinet members” (Laothamatas, 208).

The problem is that urban, educated, cosmopolitan candidates, who are skilled policy experts, are often held in equal contempt by villagers. They are often regarded as being alien to rural electorates in terms of taste, culture, and outlook, who “fail to stay close to the voters in both a physical and cultural sense” (Laothamatas, 208). Veiled contempt for rural-dwellers by sophisticated Bangkok elites
posed no problem under authoritarian regimes. Once democratic elections tipped the balance in favor of rural areas, however, significant gaps in perceptions of and commitments to democracy have developed.

These cleavages have, over the past decade, produced considerable political conflict that until recently seemed to be abating. Laorthamatas argues that this fundamental conflict cannot be resolved until the urban middle class accepts alternative versions of democracy that make room for understandings and aspirations of rural voters, especially the need for the rural poor to draw benefits away from the center and distribute them toward rural areas. “Ideally, patron-client ties might be replaced by a more responsive and effective system of local government. On top of that, voters are to be convinced that principle or policy-oriented voting brings them greater benefits than what they may get from local patrons” (Laorthamatas, 223).

There is growing evidence, also, that, while the urban middle class opposes authoritarian forms of government that restrict individual freedoms and exercise a heavy hand over commerce, the uncertainty of changes in government, even by democratic processes, is often viewed as destabilizing the economic environment on which entrepreneurs depend. The possibility that government may be seized by politicians with rural, “populist” agendas poses an even more direct threat to the interests of a class that stands significantly above the average voter in Thai elections. The traditional emphasis on the “middle class” (that characterizes Bangkok “culture”), as an engine of democracy appears to be declining in favor of a view that middle-class support for democracy exists primarily when it coincides with class interests in curbing the power of government. This means that one cannot expect middle-class enthusiasm for democracy when it poses conflicts with private interests of the middle class. This latter view is expressed both by Laorthamatas (1996), who argues that the 1991 coup could not have been sustained except for support from the middle class, and Samudavanija (1998), who notes that the role of the middle class in Thailand, vis-à-vis democracy, has been “reactive rather than proactive” (156) and that its primary interest in democracy has been
“to safeguard their own freedom and the freedom of the market” (158). Similarly, the coup of 2006 is often conceived as a revolt of the Bangkok-middle-class against dominance of the government by populist politicians who gain their support from rural masses.

The recent political conflict in Thailand, however, pitted the politics of Bangkok against the rural North, Northeast, and Central regions from which the majority party, Thai Rak Thai, drew its strength. Historically, Thai politics was dominated by Bangkok, even though Bangkok comprises only about 15 percent of the population of Thailand. As democracy began to take hold (with each voter in the rural areas counting as much as each voter in Bangkok), it was only a matter of time before political power would shift to the politics and priorities of rural Thailand. The conflict between Bangkok and the hinterland was long in building, but, once the structures of democracy were in place, it was not long before the rural 80 percent asserted their political strength to the alarm of Bangkok elites.

This contribution assumes a fundamental premise that meanings of democracy are diverse by rural-urban sector in Thailand and examines equally diverse values within the Thai nation that contribute to such diverse understandings. The explanations of these diversities require further analysis, but here are tentative elaborations of the factors associated with both rural-urban and class cleavages that seem to mark the significantly different emphases in approaches to democracy, much as Laothamatas describes.

Sources of both the 1991 and 2006 coups are, thus, rooted in the fundamental cleavages between Bangkok and the hinterland. One source of these cleavages comes from the significant class differences between Bangkok and the rest of Thailand, as one might expect. Table 4 shows highly significant differences between respondents in the two areas in both income and education. What is even more interesting for

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4 There is a piece of Thai conventional political wisdom that “rural areas elect parliaments, and Bangkok overthrows them.”
purposes of this analysis are significant differences in how Thais view themselves. Other polls, for example, show significant differences between these areas in two dimensions. The first being the degree to which respondents consider themselves to be “villagers” (chao ban) as opposed to “urban people” (khon muang), how much they think of themselves as “traditional” (mai thansammay) as opposed to “modern” (thansammay), and indicators of cultural values, such as what kind of music they like to listen to extra period Based upon previous scholarship, “modern attitudes” should also contribute to greater support for democracy (Dalton and Shin, 2007).

Table 4: Bangkok-non-Bangkok Disparities in Income, Education, and “Modern Orientation” (2005) ANOVA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Bangkok</th>
<th>Non-Bangkok</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig. of F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean Household Income</td>
<td>26,995</td>
<td>10142</td>
<td>168.19</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Monthly in Baht)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Education*</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td>62.42</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean of Subjective</td>
<td>.561</td>
<td>-.059</td>
<td>66.61</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation to modernism</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Based upon a 10-point scale from 1=no education to 10=post-graduate degree

A poll taken as late as April, 2006, shows that over 83.8 percent of the electorate were satisfied with democracy and the way it works in Thailand. In addition, 81.6 percent said that democracy is always preferable to authoritarian or other forms of government and, nearly 85 percent indicated confidence in the ability of democracy to solve problems of the nation. Using a ten-point scale evaluating democracy in Thailand, less than 1 percent of the sample agreed that democracy is “unsuitable for Thailand” and nearly 46 percent “want complete democracy now.”

Thus, in a superficial way, Thais are highly supportive of the “idea” of democracy in virtually every dimension. The fact that 30.5 percent of the sample rated the economy as “bad” or “very bad” and
only 30.8 percent rate it as “good” or “very good,” in the 2006 poll implies that the high level of commitment to democracy obtains in the midst of both objective and subjective economic difficulties, thereby reinforcing the significance of the high level of democratic adherents.

When forced to choose between democracy and economic development, however, the commitment to democracy appears somewhat ambivalent. 46.7 percent indicate a preference for economic development over democracy, while only 30.6 percent remain committed to democracy over economic development defined as “improving one’s standard of living.” The question, however, asks respondents to choose between an abstract concept (democracy) and a concrete improvement in one’s personal livelihood; therefore, one should take these responses with a grain of caution.

An analysis even more sensitive to democratic orientations indicates a Thai public strongly supportive of democratic institutions. When asked about alternatives such as “replacing parliament with a strong leader,” “abolishing opposition parties,” or “letting the military run things,” respondents reject these alternatives by large margins. Among these alternatives to an elected parliament, support for military governance is quite low, with over 78 percent rejecting this alternative (Table 5).

5 The remaining respondents rated the economy as “so-so.”

6 It is important to note that Thai optimism about the future is high. 66.6 percent of respondents believe that the economic situation of their family will be better in the near future; only 7.2 percent believe that it will be worse.
Table 5: Percent of Respondents Accepting Alternatives to Democracy, 2006
N=1546

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Non-Bangkok</th>
<th>Bangkok</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opposition parties should be abolished</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>19.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The military should come in to govern the country</td>
<td>20.6</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>21.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We should replace parliament with a strong leader</td>
<td>23.2</td>
<td>31.9</td>
<td>24.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Differences between Bangkok and non-Bangkok respondents significant at p<.01.)

There are significant differences between Bangkok and non-Bangkok populations, however, when it comes to support for these items. A majority of respondents in both areas are generally opposed to any of these alternatives, but there are significantly higher levels of support for authoritarian alternatives in Bangkok than in the rest of the nation (Table 3). Support for the coup of September 19, 2006, clearly has its seeds in the metropole-hinterland divide. With control of the instruments of violence, an elite minority easily overcame public opposition to an unconstitutional overthrow of a democratic regime. Reinforcing this finding is the fact that abolishing opposition parties has significantly higher support among the more highly educated and persons of higher socio-economic status, probably because parties are viewed as instruments for mobilizing the masses against elite dominance of the political arena.

When these attitudes are differentiated between Bangkok and non-Bangkok populations, it becomes clear that Bangkok residents are significantly more supportive of alternatives to democracy than those residing in the hinterland (Table 3). Bangkok residents are more likely to accept a “strong leader” over parliamentary government, one-party governance, and even military rule than are citizens who live outside the capital.
When attitudes toward civil liberties are examined, there is somewhat more ambiguity in the Thai population’s commitment to traditional, liberal democratic values. Table 6 shows that Thais are somewhat anxious about social instability. While generally supporting unconstrained freedom of speech, diversity of political and social views appears threatening (75.8 percent) and nearly half the respondents (45.5) are not prepared to tolerate minority viewpoints.

Table 6: Support for Liberal Democracy, 2006
(Percent Strongly Agree or Agree) N=1546

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Non-Bangkok</th>
<th>Bangkok</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diverse views will tend to* make society chaotic</td>
<td>80.4</td>
<td>83.7</td>
<td>80.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization of groups** disrupt harmony in society</td>
<td>86.7</td>
<td>88.1</td>
<td>86.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The government should decide** whether certain ideas can be discussed in society</td>
<td>47.4</td>
<td>54.0</td>
<td>48.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When a country is facing a difficult** situation, it is OK for the government to disregard the law in order to deal with the situation</td>
<td>58.9</td>
<td>61.1</td>
<td>59.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Differences between Bangkok and non-Bangkok respondents significant:
*p<.05; **p<.01

Bangkok residents, in 2006, are significantly less supportive of diversity and freedoms generally associated with civil liberties than in the past. They are more likely to be sympathetic to constraints on civil liberties, particularly during times of national emergencies. These views represent significant changes in attitudes of the Bangkok population in the face of a growing crisis. It should be noted, however, that these views may reflect the general anxiety among Bangkok residents with regard to the constant unrest posed by anti-Thaksin movements and the
crisis of the April 2006 elections, also dominating the scene during the time this poll was taken.

Perhaps the most direct test of Laothamatas’ thesis comes from a poll taken in 2005, in which respondents were asked to offer information on the importance of various criteria used in the voting choice. These values factor naturally into three dimensions, representing “candidate expertise and capability,” “candidate orientations to localism (or even pork barrel politics),” and somewhat superficial, “personal attributes of a candidate.” The “two democracies” thesis suggests that Bangkok residents and non-Bangkok populations will hold significantly different orientations to these three dimensions. The essential cleavage will be that Bangkok residents will adopt an orientation favoring policy oriented expertise, while non-Bangkok populations will follow candidates that are local-community based in their orientations.

Table 8: Respondent Evaluations of Candidate Characteristics, An ANOVA Analysis  
N = 1937

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate Characteristics</th>
<th>Capability</th>
<th>Localism</th>
<th>Personalism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bangkok</strong></td>
<td>.1500</td>
<td>-.8814</td>
<td>-.5694</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Remainder of Thailand</strong></td>
<td>-.0154</td>
<td>.0905</td>
<td>.0585</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>F-Value</strong></td>
<td>4.516</td>
<td>169.341</td>
<td>67.264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sig. of F</strong></td>
<td>.034</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data in Table 7 show highly significant differences between Bangkok and the rest of Thailand in what is important about political candidates to residents in the respective sectors. Bangkok residents are more attracted to impressions of expertise and ability than are residents of the hinterland. In contrast, Bangkok respondents are strongly negative about “localistic” orientations, as well as reliance on personal
traits that include “personality” and “good financial status.” The data thus support Laothamatas’ view that Bangkok residents see democracy as a means of producing political and policy experts, while rural areas are much more attracted to candidates who can produce benefits for the local community in a “pork-barrel” sense. Whether tensions between these two views of what electoral democracy is all about can ever be resolved is clearly a continuing challenge for democracy in Thailand.

The data reflect what can be described as a fundamental conflict between citizens who believe that politics (and the government that results) should represent policy choices among political parties in a “Responsible Party” model and Downsian voters who view elections as opportunities to maximize private utility. Downs (1957), for example, argues that the essence of democracy is that a citizen may use the ballot as a way of maximizing individual or private utility. For Downs, the voter choice is about a calculation as to which candidate (or party) is likely to bring the most benefit to the voter. This cleavage represents an essential difference between the “two democracies” or the fundamental difference in political cultures between the metropole and the hinterland.

What are the sources of these documented political cleavages between Bangkok and non-Bangkok residents? The data allow further explorations of attitudes and opinions in both social and political dimensions that discriminate between Bangkok and non-Bangkok societies in Thailand.

The data reported in Table 8 indicate existing cleavages between these two societies and cultures. Of all social issues distinguishing between the two populations, safety and trust are the most distinguishing differences. Ironically (and contrary to expectations), urban respondents appear to feel more insecure and lacking in social trust than those in rural areas. Nevertheless, these differences are significant and help to explain why urban dwellers appear more amenable to military interventions to preserve “law and order.”

7 One possible interpretation of this anomaly is that Bangkok residents have a “siege mentality” regarding rural Thailand, with which they identify many ills of the Thai state.
Table 8: Social and Political Attitudes Distinguishing Bangkok and Non-Bangkok Populations in Thailand

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>% Agree or “Yes”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bangkok</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Most people can be trusted”¹</td>
<td>15.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Most people can be trusted”²</td>
<td>20.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Compared to a few years ago do you feel more safe” (more)</td>
<td>35.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“How safe is your community (very)”</td>
<td>37.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Economic situation of family in a few years (better)”</td>
<td>72.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>% Agree or “Yes”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bangkok</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Not satisfied with way democracy works”</td>
<td>13.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Conflict among political groups is not bad”</td>
<td>58.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Army should come in to govern”</td>
<td>31.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Present political situation is good”</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Last elections not free and fair” (2006)</td>
<td>17.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Election conducted completely freely and fairly” (2006)</td>
<td>28.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Personally experienced corruption”</td>
<td>35.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Polls taken in 2005 and 2006.
¹ Classic two-part question: “Most people can be trusted”, “You can’t be too careful in dealing with other people.”
² Four responses to “How much can you trust other people.”
Bangkok dwellers also appear significantly more negative about the state of political affairs than those living outside the metropole. Most Bangkok residents believe that the corruption of politics occurs primarily in rural areas, and they are far more likely to look with disdain on outcomes of elections as being free, fair, and otherwise representative of the Thai people, perhaps reflecting the Bangkok bias against rural voters. Some of this suspicion is based upon cultural differences noted above – but it also represents an elite disgust for Downsian voters who attempt to “maximize utility” in the electoral process.

Bangkok residents indicate a higher level of personal experience with corruption (Table 8). In fact, the overall experience of corruption in the sample is only 9.6%. When respondents were asked for their “agreement” or “disagreement” with a statement “sometimes corruption in government is necessary in order to get things done,” 30.3% of Bangkok respondents “Strongly agreed,” whereas only 6.4% on non-Bangkok residents supported such a view. Clearly, Bangkok residents have a considerably higher tolerance of corruption, as well as a higher level of personal experience. These data are mirrored in relative evaluations of corruption in government, with 37.9% of Bangkok respondents indicating that most or all officials are corrupt, but only 24.7% of non-Bangkok residents indicating the same evaluation of government officials.
Developing Disillusionment with Democracy

A growing disillusionment with democracy, arguably associated with highly divergent views of what democracy is all about, seemed to seize Bangkok elites in the months leading up to the coup. Signs of lessening affection for democratic government appeared in polls at the time of parliamentary elections in 2005, and, in 2006, at the time of the Senate elections and the abortive House elections in April. Much of the decline in support for democracy was associated with differences between Bangkok and the hinterland. For example, one item in the 2006 poll asked how respondents would describe the present political situation in Thailand. 32.3 percent of non-Bangkok respondents answered “Good” or “Very Good,” while residents of Bangkok responded only 20 percent in those categories (Table 8).

Responses to two other questions also appear shaped by the emerging conflict. The first asked whether respondents agreed or disagreed with the statement: “Conflict among political groups is not a bad thing for our country.” In the 2005 poll, 58.6 percent of Bangkok respondents agreed, but only 47.4 percent of the sample outside Bangkok could accept the idea of political conflict which, by this time, was endemic in Bangkok. An authoritarian view also emerges in responses to the question: “It is better to live in an orderly society than to allow people so much freedom that it can disrupt our stability and development,” and support for military intervention by Bangkok and non-Bangkok respondents reveals growing support for a coup (Table 9).
Table 9: Cleavages between Rural and Urban Populations in 2005 Polls, ANOVA Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Bangkok</th>
<th>Non-BKK</th>
<th>F-Value</th>
<th>Sig. of F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is better to live in an orderly society than to allow people so much freedom that it disrupts development.</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>7.86</td>
<td>7.26</td>
<td>8.952</td>
<td>.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Even if a government is democratically elected, if it is corrupt, the military should come in to set things right.</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>5.92</td>
<td>6.18</td>
<td>1.211</td>
<td>.271</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree; 10 = Strongly Agree

Two features of responses to these questions bear mentioning. First, the overall mean of Thai respondents on a ten-point scale from 1-Strongly Disagree to 10-Strongly Agree is in excess of 7.0 on the first question, implying that Thais have little tolerance for social disorder even when it is associated with freedom of expression. In addition, the mean for Bangkok respondents is 7.86, while respondents from the rest of Thailand accepted such a notion at a lower level of 7.28, implying that [Bangkok residents are significantly less tolerant of societal conflict than citizens in the hinterland.]

One of the most interesting observations from the data was responses to the statement: “Even if a government is democratically elected, if it is corrupt, the military should come in to set things right.” An F-test for differences of means shows no significant difference between the two sectors (Table 9). Upon further inspection, however, the Bangkok portion of the sample turns out to be highly polarized in its responses, while the sample from the rest of Thailand is relatively evenly distributed across the 10 categories. Among Bangkok
respondents, 44.6 percent responded “Strongly Agree” (scored as 10) with this statement, but a corresponding 34.8 percent responded “Strongly Disagree” (scored as 1). In other words, over 75 percent of Bangkok respondents are sharply polarized; they locate themselves on extreme ends of the scale with regard to the desirability of a military coup (Table 10). Although means of the two groups do not differ substantially, the distributions vary dramatically, indicating a high level of polarization in Bangkok, a factor conducive to potential future conflicts.

**Table 10: Distributions of Support for Military Intervention When Government is Viewed as Corrupt (2005) N = 1981**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Non-Bangkok</th>
<th>Bangkok</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Non-Bangkok</th>
<th>Bangkok</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>44.6</td>
<td>19.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi-Square = 181.927 Sig. p<.000

It is too facile to view these cleavages either as a product only of class or even of the Bangkok-non-Bangkok divide. There is also another, more subtle, dimension to the emerging political conflict. The conflict over the Thaksin regime exposed significant differences between “traditional elites” and the masses in their understandings of
popular democracy. Publicly expressed views of academics and supporters of traditional society indicate that the “reformers” expected voters to support traditional elites, that is, those who were “supposed” to lead the nation. The capture of the government by mass (as opposed to elite-led) democracy brought about a corresponding disillusionment with democratic elections among intellectual and urban elites. This sentiment was represented by academic and social activist Thirayuth Boonmi, who was quoted by the Bangkok Post as saying that it was worrisome that Prime Minister Thaksin had mobilized the poor --- and gotten them involved in politics (italics mine). What was even more worrisome, he went on to say, was that the poor voted differently from the middle class (italics also mine). The conflict between an emerging, mass-based democracy and traditions embedded in a hierarchical society pose a major obstacle to further consolidation of Thai democracy.

Among the “traditional elites” who have become increasingly uncomfortable with democracy are the “royalists.” Unable to unseat Thaksin by legitimate means, royalist elites made alliances with anti-Thaksin protest movements to the extent that representatives of the anti-Thaksin alliances appeared often “at the door of the palace” asking for help in turning Thaksin out of office. Thaksin did not help his cause by appearing to compete with the king, especially in insinuating himself into ceremonies honoring the 60th year of the king’s accession to the throne. The hard line taken by the government in denying full control in the South to the military and interference in the annual reshuffle of military officers alienated key elements of powerful elites that had been quiescent for over a decade. In addition, efforts to rein in the bureaucracy, the Ministry of the Interior in particular, alienated holders of powerful positions that make Thailand function and the historic “bureaucratic polity” does not go quietly.

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8 Report in the Bangkok Post of a comment on a Thirayut speech to supporters during a rally at Sanam Luang, Bangkok, on March 12, 2006.
Constitutional “Reform”

Many Thai intellectuals have little regard for constitutions; therefore, the abrogation of the Constitution of 1997, has evoked only scant elite opposition. This constitution, however, has been suggested as the basic document for any new reform efforts and has received support from Abhisit Vejjajiva, leader of the opposition Prajadhipat (Democrat) Party. The Constitution of 1997 outlines explicit political and human rights unmatched in most constitutions of democratic states. Whether a new constitution will infringe upon or maintain these rights remains an open question.

Because the new Constitutional Drafting Assembly is squarely in the hands of Bangkok elites, agitators for constitutional reform are united in attempting to write a constitution that will prevent concentrations of power such as those of the Thai Rak Thai party during the past five years. The Constitution of 1997, was designed, of course, to overcome the anarchy of coalition governments that proved unstable and were associated with the economic collapse of the late 1990s. The solution appears to lie in what Thais refer to as “checks and balances.” These are a series of institutions designed to countermand the government in a variety of sensitive areas, including the Election Commission, the Constitutional Court, the Administrative Court, a Human Rights Commission, and a National Counter-Corruption Commission.

The Constitution of 1997, however, never solved the problem of how these bodies were to be constituted. The solution was to have members of these agencies appointed by a theoretically nonpartisan Senate. Because these bodies often found in favor of the government, criticism of the Thaksin administration began to spill over onto these independent bodies. At this point, it is not clear how the issue of appointments to what are, in principle, watchdog bodies will be resolved. Furthermore, it is probably naïve to think that all aspects of corruption can be forestalled by any constitutional document. In fact, many of the complaints about elections actually target organic laws, not
provisions of the Constitution. The elites, who will dominate the constitutional drafting assembly, will attempt to make sure that the threat of populist government does not arise again, but proposals, to date, forecast a convoluted system whose only attribute will be to diminish governing authority by elected representatives.
Analysis and Conclusions

The history of democracy in Thailand has been one of elite-guided democracy. These elites, heavily royalist, have always been represented geographically in terms of location – Bangkok versus the hinterland. Whether these Bangkok-based royalist-intellectual and social elites will cede political authority to the mass of citizens remains the major issue for democratic governance, that is, progress toward mass-based democracy. Dominance by Bangkok elites of the press and academic discourse makes this course an uphill struggle, and foreign media interpretations often rely on the very elites whose interest is at stake. The mantra of “corruption,” repeated so often by elites opposed to Thaksin to justify the coup, is not perceived by the nation as a whole, especially in the rural areas (Table 7).

The data on Bangkok-non-Bangkok cleavages reinforce a view that the effects of “culture” are diverse within a single nation. Furthermore, variations in cultural orientations within Thai society appear to arise primarily from orientations to life from the city and the countryside and, to only a small degree, from differing positions in society related to socioeconomic status or class. These variations by sector are so significant that it is difficult to refer to any aggregate of attitudes and opinions as distinctively “Thai.” In fact, there is evidence that differing distributions of populations on these dimensions underlie what we often observe as differences among nations. In other words, variance within nations on these dimensions supercedes variance among nations. There are no distinctly “Asian values” other than those that derive from variations between rural and urban cultures or other such dimensions, and the search for distinctly “Thai” values appears chimerical at best. A more detailed explication of these variations cries out for further analysis.

Traditionalistic versus modernistic orientations to society and interpersonal behavior are also products of these social forces. The data show, first, that traditional values turn out to be largely the values of rural society. These values are only modestly related to class and status
and, more importantly, to location of people in what we call “Urban” or “Rural” cultures. When Laothamatas argues that Thailand represents significantly different evaluations of democracy, he is actually referring to a distribution of distinctly different cultures characterizing Bangkok and non-Bangkok areas. Because of these dramatic differences in cultural orientations, there are corresponding differences in support for democracy.

Perhaps even more important is the fact that these cultures support very different kinds of “democracy.” Rural and low-status respondents appear to support a popular, majoritarian form of government that also values political equality. Urban, upper-status, and less traditional (that is, more cosmopolitan) take a rather different view. Thailand is, as Laothamatas observed a “tale of two democracies.”

Cultural values appear to have less to do historical factors than in demographic ones, notably rural-urban location and, to a lesser extent, in socioeconomic status. On balance, traditional orientations tend to support the idea of democracy, but support restraints on popular rule, in the form of preferences for judicial and legislative control of society under a rule of law. The experience of many Thais, perhaps, makes them somewhat cynical about the efficacy of the rule of law, but this is one of the dimensions that distinguish between cosmopolitan, upper-status elites and the rest of Thai society. While significant majorities of the Thai population oppose domination of the political system by the military or other elites, a majority in some cases would accept government control of the judiciary or even the parliament in order to promote the well-being of the Thai nation. A principled support for the rights of minorities, however, is notably weaker than support for mass democracy in Thailand.

This finding calls into question the blurring of distinctions between democracy and forms of pluralist democracy or “polyarchy.” The goal for democratic development has been the liberation of societies from authoritarian, sometimes dictatorial, rule, and Thailand appeared to have accomplished this objective and was well on its way to consolidating electoral and procedural democracy in all of its
aspects. Other democratic values, such as political equality, appear to be caught up in issues related to “elite guidance” of the society, a position at odds with values of the rural citizenry.

Perhaps it is surprising to some that “democracy” finds significantly less support in urban than in rural society. Although some considerable part of this picture comes from idiosyncrasies of Thai history and politics, at least this study identifies significantly disparate cultures that separate urban from non-urban Thailand. Because the urban-non-urban indicator is essentially a “dummy” variable, this study also cries out for more elaboration from detailed surveys focusing on political attitudes within the Bangkok metropolitan area.

In the final analysis, the data paint a picture of a beleaguered capital city, highly protective, if not fearful, of its privileged position in Thai society. Because democracy transfers control of authority from traditional elites to disparate masses, the former understandably resist devolution of power away from the Bangkok centre, but overthrow of a democratically elected government by unconstitutional means, especially with the collaboration of the palace, is shattering for analysts who believed that Thailand was making progress away from an elite-dominated society. In this case, elites have responded to a populist government with a resounding “No, we will not tolerate mass rule!” In the long run, however, only mass-based democracy can be called true democracy.

Earlier optimism about Thailand as a “democratic” state should have all but evaporated. Clearly, Bangkok elites will not tolerate the radical changes in society implied by mass democracy, and democracy is not possible when elected governments do not have control over the instruments of force, the military. What is most disillusioning for lovers of Thai democracy is that Thailand had come so far.

See also the type in the Appendix (p. 34)
Table 1: Factor Analysis of Indicators Representing Dimensions in Attitudes Toward Democracy (2005)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity</th>
<th>Approx. Chi-Square</th>
<th>3192.663</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>66</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>.000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rotated Component Matrix</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Political Equality</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Authoritarian Alternatives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To what extent would you want our country to be democratic now</td>
<td>-.134</td>
<td>3.833E-02</td>
<td>.690</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which people think democracy is suitable for our country</td>
<td>-5.312E-02</td>
<td>-1.176E-02</td>
<td>.701</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which of the following statements comes closest to your own opinion</td>
<td>-5.350E-02</td>
<td>2.074E-02</td>
<td>.582</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which of the following statements comes closer to your own view</td>
<td>-3.312E-03</td>
<td>4.439E-02</td>
<td>.703</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We should get rid of parliament and elections and have a strong leader decide things</td>
<td>-1.679E-02</td>
<td>.828</td>
<td>.132</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Only one political party is allowed to stand for election and hold office  
-2.967E-02  .851  8.020E-03  

The army should come in to govern the country  
-1.000E-02  .828  -3.433E-02  

These people Thai-Muslim/Thai-PooKao should have the equal right to do whatever they want to do as other citizens  
.783  -.198  -2.870E-03  

They should enjoy the same right as other citizens to vote in the election of the top leader  
.864  -9.447E-02  6.110E-03  

Their basic well-being should be taken care of by the government to the same extent as other citizens  
.842  -9.048E-02  -6.241E-02  

A citizen who does not actively participate in the affairs of his local and national community is not performing his duties  
.615  .113  -.170  

Citizens should always obey laws and regulations, even if they disagree with them  
.663  .148  -8.882E-02  

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.  
Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.  
a Rotation converged in 4 iterations.  
Proportion of Variance = 58.00


