Why Isn’t Thailand’s Middle Class Fond of Democracy?

By Pavin Chachavalpongpun

Following two coups in the space of eight years — and a military government still in place since the latest coup in 2014 — democracy in Thailand remains in peril.

Complicating efforts to restore it is that the country’s Bangkok-based middle class and civil society are intent on preserving their political interests at the expense of the rural population, whose political awakening was triggered by the rise of Thaksin Shinawatra and his proxies.

Pavin Chachavalpongpun explains how Thailand’s middle class is betraying democracy.

SCHOLARS ON THE WHOLE concur that the growth of the middle class and civil society organizations plays a pivotal role in the promotion of democracy. In other words, their expansion is partly responsible for enabling a democratic system to function. They closely monitor a government’s performance and its commitment to good governance. The middle class also demands access to political resources, while underscoring the importance of participatory democracy.

In Thailand, however, the orthodox concept of the middle class as an agent of democratic change seems to be under challenge. Since the Thai political crisis of 2005, which culminated a year later in the military coup that overthrew the elected government of Thaksin Shinawatra, it has become apparent that the Thai middle class and the country’s many civil society organizations are no longer agents of change, but instead have become guardians of the ancien régime — apparently to protect their political advantages.

In 2005, the Bangkok-based middle class, under a new movement called the People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD), took to the streets to topple Thaksin, largely considered a champion of the poor, on the grounds that he abused power for his own benefit. Clad in yellow shirts, these protesters also accused Thaksin of disrespecting the much-revered monarchy — an inviolable institution in Thailand. Yellow is the color of the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej, and therefore the mission of removing Thaksin’s regime became imperative and legitimate. On the surface, the middle class and civil society claimed to be guarding democracy, which had supposedly been tainted by Thaksin. At a deeper level, however, it was the fear that Thaksin and his assertive populist policies would empower marginalized rural citizens that explained why the middle class and civil society rejected his kind of democracy. The monarchy, long regarded as a symbol of prosperity for the Thai middle class, conveniently provided itself as an instrument for its supporters to disparage democracy, à la Thaksin, through a binary choice: moral vs immoral politics, with the monarch representing the moral force versus immoral and selfish politicians.

The middle class and civil society thus exploited the royal institution for its own gains and only offered support for democracy when it responded to its needs. However, the era of King Bhumibol has recently ended. He passed away on Oct. 13, 2016, paving the way for his unpopular son, Vajiralongkorn, to be enthroned. Anxiety over his departure has further alienated the middle class and civil society from their supposed role as agents of democratic change. This explains why they largely endorsed the military coup of 2006, as well as the 2014 coup that removed Yingluck Shinawatra, sister of Thaksin, from power. The 2014 coup was testimony to the way in which the Thai middle class and civil society have turned their collective backs on democracy.

In this context, I argue that the way Thailand’s middle class and civil society have treated democracy depends primarily on the extent to which any political change affects their political interests. With the uncertainties brought about by the new king, the middle class and civil society have cast doubts on democracy, mainly because, without King Bhumibol, the monarchy can no longer guarantee their political interests in the transition period. The Thai case is not uncommon and can be witnessed in other parts of Southeast Asia where democracy ceases to deliver stability for the middle class and civil society.

UNDERSTANDING THE THAI MIDDLE CLASS

There are two schools of thought on the Thai middle class. First, champions of the modernization school posit that when a nation reaches a high degree of economic development, leading to a better livelihood for its citizens, what follows is the consolidation of democracy, supposedly promoted by the new middle class. As people become richer, they are more inclined to entertain certain liberal attitudes, which, in turn, represent a key ingredient in the making of a more democratic society. Education solidifies the liberal attitudes of the new middle class.

According to this theory, the more affluent middle class is likely to develop a tolerance toward the lower class or working class, so that they live side by side under a democracy, despite conflicting interests. But critics of the modernization school point out some shortcomings in this argument. Countries such as Singapore and Malaysia, which have been able to generate high economic growth, continue to centralize political power at the expense of an enlarging middle class.

In rejecting the modernization school, I prefer to use a more relevant term — the “contingent class.” In recent decades, through a series of political developments, the Thai middle class has sought to co-operate with the military to defend its own political interests. Occasionally, they organized months-long street protests to overthrow elected governments, purportedly because the latter failed to protect the interests of the former. The middle class has since been perceived as an unreliable partner of democracy. The Thai middle class has only lent its support for democratization on conditional terms, thus earning the title of the “contingent class.”

The Thai middle class has a wide range of characteristics, some of which are not unique to Thailand. The array of backgrounds, rang-
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in October has further entrenched a desire for stability among the middle classes amid anxiety for the future. Thais in yellow pray in Bangkok for the 70th anniversary of Thai King Bhumibol Adulyadej’s accession to the throne in June 2016. His death currently has more than 300 member organizations, ranging from small voluntary-based ones to major national ones. 5 Gavin Chutima, “Thai NGOs and Civil Society,” Thai NGOs: The Continuing Struggle for Democracy (Bangkok: Thai NGO Support Project, 1995), p.140. Quoted in Chakrit Tiebienrat, “Change: Civil

organizations or are otherwise interested in global affairs. KEPA (accessed July 15, 2016). KEPA is the umbrella organization for

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ings from intellectuals, civil society organizations, non-governmental organizations and white-collar workers to entrepreneurs of all kinds prevents a unified group from forming. In addition, there are inconsistent ideologies and variable political preferences among the Thai middle class. This can be seen through its unpredictable and sometimes anti-democratic stand-points, from endorsing military coups and calling for the king to intervene in political crises to giving consent to the appointment of unelected prime ministers. The Thai middle class fiercely guards its own interests, which include holding on to political power, manipulation of the democratic process and a monopoly on the state’s economic resources. In instances where the Thai middle class is able to secure its political position through the democratic process, it is willing to discuss political inclusion or even support for the lower class under different alliances. But when its interests come under threat from the lower rungs of society, the middle class switches to political exclusion, while at the same time seeking to undermine those posing a threat to it.

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS: WHICH ROAD TO TAKE?

Thai civil-society organizations have been slow to develop. They only began their political activism in the context of the political violence in the 1960s and 1970s, when successive governments, with the backing of the army, cracked down on pro-democracy movements spearheaded by students and intellectuals. The first Thai NGO, the Thai Rural Reconstruction Movement, was established in 1969, but volunteer activism only started to proliferate after the student uprising in the 1970s and was consolidated as part of a more forceful civil society in the 1980s. 4 In the political arena, civil-society organizations worked closely with the middle class, as became evident during the anti-government demonstrations against self-appointed Prime Minister General Suchinda Kraprayoon in 1992. From this perspective, civil-society organizations shared much of their political consciousness with the Thai middle class.

Rapid economic growth also resulted in development implications among the country’s civil-society organizations. While some NGOs worked for a better livelihood for marginalized citizens in remote regions, others forged an association with the middle class to safeguard their way of life, and promoting political reform in order to achieve a more efficient and rational government while rejecting corrupt and paternalistic forms of governance. But Narueemon also cautions that elite-urban civil society can be considered as a force for democracy only as long as it plays a role in opposing the bureaucratic. 3 Narueemon Thabchumpoon defines middle class-based civil society as “elite-urban,” consisting of, for example, progressive civil servants and the business community. Because of the country’s national economic development policies, elite-urban civil society has increased and gained more political clout compared to its counterparts in the grassroots community, or the “rural-popular.” 7 Narueemon highlights certain attributes of elite-urban civil society as being Bangkok-based or concentrated mostly in urban centers, forgoing close communications networks with the mass media (and today, social media) to encourage free debate on issues affecting their way of life, and promoting political reform in order to achieve a more efficient and rational government while rejecting corrupt and paternalistic forms of governance. But Narueemon also cautions that elite-urban civil society can be considered as a force for democracy only as long as it plays a role in opposing the bureaucratic. 7 Narueemon also cautions that elite-urban civil society can be considered as a force for democracy only as long as it plays a role in opposing the bureaucratic.
DEMOCRATIZATION IN THAILAND: RISE AND FALL

The political landscape of Thailand bears revisiting, at least as far back as the political turmoil during the Thaksin administration. Beginning with his election in 2001, Thaksin rode his pro-poor policies to overwhelming success and attempted to shift the country’s power equilibrium, which was bound to shake the political and economic status of the middle class. As he completed his first term in office, becoming the first prime minister to see out a full term, the political landscape became geared toward rural residents who were supporters of Thaksin’s populist programs. In revisiting earlier arguments mentioned in this essay, one can understand why members of the middle class, mainly those in Bangkok, felt that they had been deprived of their privileged political position under the Thaksin government—a government that assumed power through a coup against the Thaksin government. In 2014, the rise and fall of democracy in modern Thailand, as demonstrated in two successive coups, can be described, on the one hand, as a situation in which the middle class and civil society could no longer tolerate corrupt regimes and therefore gave their support to the coups, based, ironically, on their democratic ideology. On the other hand, a deeper analysis is needed in order to comprehend the complexity of Thai politics beyond a struggle between the “moral” middle class and civil society and “immoral” politicians. It is true that the “network monarchy,” which includes key institutions such as the monarchy, bureaucracy and military, had long governed Thailand, as demonstrated in two successive coups, causing grave concerns among the rural population.

Thaksin constructed his political network by highlighting the fact that the electoral process could be used to overturn the power equilibrium and dismantle the status quo. He therefore concentrated on winning votes from the two regions of the country long marginalized by the network monarchy—the north and northeast. Thaksin could count on those votes owing to his generous populist programs. As a consequence, his political party, Thai Rak Thai, won landslide elections twice, causing grave concerns among the network monarchy and the middle class, which retaliated through extra-parliamentary means. The network monarchy, drawing on the powerful moral authority of King Bhumibol, might have dominated the political realm in this way for several decades, but Bhumibol died and Thailand’s new king, Vajiralongkorn, undoubtedly is generating concerns among supporters of the monarchy, particularly due to the Thaksin phenomenon. This anxiety has further driven Thailand’s middle class to divorce itself from trust in the democratic apparatus.

At this critical royal transition, both the middle class and urban-elite civil society do not even hide their taste for authoritarianism. It manifests itself chiefly in politicization and self-interest on their part.


10 Thai Rak Thai became Thailand’s first political party to achieve massive electoral success. After Thaksin was overthrown, it was disbanded. He then formed a new party, the People’s Power Party (PPP), led by Somak Sundaivong. But the Constitutional Court ordered the PPP’s dissolution on the grounds of electoral fraud. With the collapse of the PPP, Thaksin set up the Phuea Thai Party, which won an election in 2011, landing his sister Yingluck Shinawatra the premiership.

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