During the so-called “Third Wave of Democratization” that swept Asia beginning in the 1980s, there was widespread optimism that democracy was developing deep roots in the region. But with growing rivalry between China and the US, and changing political dynamics in many countries in Asia, there are now growing fears of democratic backsliding throughout the region.
Middle-Class Remorse: Re-embracing Liberal Democracy in the Philippines and Thailand

By Mark R. Thompson

Democracy in both Thailand and the Philippines has been crippled by support given to anti-democratic forces by intellectuals who foolishly endorsed leaders who have done serious damage to the prospects for democratic governance in both countries. The middle classes that supported those views are now seized by remorse, and it remains to be seen whether a course correction in both countries is on the horizon, writes Mark R. Thompson.

IN THE NEW LITERATURE on the old themes of “trahison des clercs” (the treason of the intellectuals) and “panic in the middle class” about the betrayal of democracy when facing threats from below, the Philippines and Thailand are striking cases of countries in which leading intellectuals have agitated for a middle class revolt against elected leaders.1

In Thailand, the high-profile academics who cast aside their democratic principles to support the 2006 army coup against elected Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra that resulted in nearly a decade and a half of military domination of Thai politics have been parodied as “tank” intellectuals who backed a “coup for the rich.” Similarly, many Philippine intellectuals supported the overthrow of the democratically elected President Joseph E. Estrada in 2001, a movie star who had transformed his cinematic image as a fighter for the poor into a successful presidential campaign.2

In a recent book, Joshua Kurlantzick has spoken of the “revolt of the middle class” as a chief cause for global democratic decline, citing the Philippine and Thai cases as prime examples.3 This anti-democratic revolt came as a surprise because middle-class-based uprisings had recently toppled corrupt dictatorships in the Philippines (“People Power” against the Marcos regime in 1986) and in Thailand (the “Black Friday Events” of 1992 that led to the fall of military ruler Suchinda Kraprayoon).

Yet, after an illiberal populist and the military took power in the Philippines and Thailand, respectively, there were clear signs of middle-class remorse. There have been significant differences between the two countries—with a middle-class electoral backlash against authoritarianism more evident in Thailand. But in both countries a significant group of former opponents of democratically elected leaders re-embraced liberal democracy as they realized the authoritarian alternative was worse.

FROM DEMOCRATIC EMPATHY TO ANTI-DEMOCRATIC REVOLT

An influential article written in 1996 by Thai political scientist Anek Laothamatas entitled A Tale of Two Democracies illustrates well the ambivalence of the middle class in the country toward electoral democracy.4 According to Anek, the urban middle class yearned for political parties that advanced the national interest while assuming that parochial rural citizens voted for gangster politicians who corrupted the political system. The middle class believed “shameful vote buying and perverted electoral behavior” to be rampant in Thai elections that returned “unqualified politicians to the corridors of power,” meaning an “elected government usually comes under attack from the middle class and its allies or mentors, such as the media or the academia.”

Anek says it is assumed, but never proven by middle class critics, that the poor sell their votes. In fact, Anek points out that rural voting in Thailand is conducted within a larger context of hua kaenar, vote canvassing networks, which consist of politicians who strive to maintain the long-term loyalties of the poor electorate by helping local communities. This can be understood as a “moral economy of electoralism,” community-based, mutualist voting in which politicians are judged according to the extent they benefit voters’ communities and affirm poor people’s self-worth.5

Yet this conflict over the ethics of electoralism between rich and poor remained largely hidden.

Through the media and academia, the middle class have been able to monopolize the discourse on political virtue. Anek advised the middle class that if they wished to realize their quest for a “virtuous democracy” they should support programs for economic development in the countryside.

However, just a decade later, in his book Thaksin-style Populism, Anek had changed his mind.6 He now seemed to accept the urban middle-class narrative of bought voters and corrupted politicians in rural areas. This change of heart came despite the fact that Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra seemed to do precisely the things that Anek had once advocated.

Taking advantage of the opportunities made possible under the electoral reforms in the new, reformist constitution of 1997 (in which power was inspired by Anek himself), Thaksin created a “strong” political party that promised (and largely delivered) pro-poor policies (including low cost universal health care and assistance to rural villages) that won him overwhelming electoral victories in 2001 and 2005. The poor, once clients of local bosses, now accepted national patronage from Thaksin and his party.

Yet Anek no longer saw this as an articulation of the poor’s different moral calculus of elections. Rather, Anek denounced Thaksin for relying on “handouts” to win the votes of the poor. This led Anek to apocalyptic conclusions: “We must deal quickly with Thaksin-style populism before it destroys the nation completely.”

Writing during the middle-class-dominated protests that paved the way for the September 2006 military-royalist coup that unseated Thaksin, Anek advocated the dismantling of the electoral system to give greater representation to the middle and upper classes. After a further coup in 2014, he accepted an important advisory appointment in the military government. While Thaksin seemed to have given voice to

1 French philosopher and author Julien Benda wrote La Trahison des Clercs in 1927, accusing intellectuals of betraying their ideals by yielding to practical power considerations that he saw happening as support for democracy declined in the inter-war period. For an English version, see Richard Aldington, trans., The Treason of the Intellectuals (New York: Norton, 1969). German sociologist Theodor W. Adorno wrote in the late Weimar period about growing middle-class support for far-right parties including the Nazis: “Punk im Mittelstand.” Punk in the Middle Class, Die Arbeit, Zeitschrift für Gewerkschaftspolitik und Wirtschaftsfakultät, Vol. 7 No. 10, 1930, pp. 637-654.


3 Joshua Kurlantzick, Democracy in Retreat: The Revolt of the Middle Class and the Worldwide Decline of Representative Government (New Haven: Yale University Press).


the previously unheard poor, Anek, articulating the views of a panicked Thai middle class, now found these populist appeals to poor voters profoundly frightening. A similar view has been taken in the Philippines by academics and the middle class. Ellies “view of the poor as voters is quite unflattering.” They assume the poor can’t grasp the “big picture” of the common good, thus leading to the election of “despised politicians.” Poor voters, unsurprisingly, see things differently. For them, “elections are the times when equality and justice are temporarily achieved as their patrons fulfill their financial obligations to support them in times of need.”

The Philippine middle class was as critical of President Joseph Estrada as their Thai counterparts would become of Thaksin. In his successful 1998 presidential campaign (and his earlier campaigns for vice president and senator), former movie star Estrada turned his lower-class fans into his voters. His middle-class detractors, by contrast, portrayed Estrada as stupid and incompetent, elected by an ignorant electorate. Using a scandal as their excuse (by no means the differentia specifica of his administration, given the many corruption affairs before and after his presidency), Estrada was forced out of office by a middle class-led uprising in early 2001.

In the Philippines, the liberal reformist narrative was revived during the presidency of Benigno “Noynoy” S. Aquino, III (2010-2016) only for it to be overturned by his successor Rodrigo Duterte, an illiberal populist who promised a violent crackdown on drugs. In Thailand, the continued popularity of Thaksin’s pro-poor appeals resulted in a series of military coups, giving the inability of elite parties campaigning for “good governance” to win elections.

**RE-EMBRACING LIBERAL DEMOCRACY**

General Prayuth Chan-ocha, head of the junta that took power in Thailand in May 2014, repeated postponed calling elections until he had introduced a new constitution and electoral system designed to dilute pro-Thaksin votes and limit the power of parliament, including a military-appointed Senate. The military government received indirect but significant backing from the new Thai King, Maha Vajiralongkorn, who had succeeded his father Bhumibol Adulyadej after his death in 2016.

But the military’s proxy, the Palang Pracharat party, was only able to “win” the March 2019 elections through the extensive use of patronage, gerrymandering, harassment of opposition campaigners and party bans, and outright fraud. Inexplicably rigged, it was considered the dirtiest election in decades, which understandably generated widespread anger.

The vacillation of the Democrats – the country’s oldest party, linked to past anti-Thaksin protests and support for coups but whose party leadership criticized the military’s efforts to retain power through elections — was punished at the polls. They did not win a single seat in Bangkok, its traditional urban middle class stronghold, reducing them to a regional party based in southern Thailand.

By contrast, an anti-military party launched for the elections, Future Forward, garnered strong support among affluent, urban voters and was particularly popular among the young. During the campaign, the party’s youthful leader, automobile parts tycoon Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, who had long been involved in political and social reform efforts, became “such a public sensation that one could speak of a “Thanathorn phenomenon.”

The party promised the restoration of civilian democratic rule even if that involved making common cause with the once-spurned Thaksin forces. It surprised observers by winning 81 seats, the third largest in the election. The party was clearly seen as a greater threat to the conservative military-monarchical establishment than the pro-Thaksin Pheu Thai party, which despite whopping manipulation retained much of its previous electoral strength. Although Thanathorn was disqualified from his parliamentary seat on transparently dubious charges, he continues to demand genuine civilian rule and has organized major protests. His party’s electoral success showed that the country’s predominant political cleavage had shifted from pro-Thaksin forces and their middle-class and statist opponents to conservative apologists of continued military-monarchical influence versus reformist advocates of a return to liberal democratic civilian rule.

In the Philippines, Duterte’s successful presidential campaign in 2016 attracted disproportionate middle-class support for his promise of order, even if it was at the expense of the rule of law. But with his increasingly arbitrary rule and growing authoritarianism, polls showed Duterte’s support beginning to wane among the middle class even as it consolidated among less advantaged voters.
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Having once abandoned electoral principles in their opposition to Estrada, leading intellectuals joined outspoken bishops in the Catholic Church, which warned that Duterte posed a grave threat to Philippine democracy, accusing his administration of massive human rights violations. But candidates backed by Duterte nonetheless dominated the mid-term elections in May 2019. With the opposition’s defeat in the senate, “the last remaining potential bastion against the Duterte juggernaut” had fallen as Duterte consolidated power in a rapidly eroding democracy.¹¹

Since then, however, Duterte seems to have become a victim of his own success. His electoral tsunami left behind an oversized coalition that has already led to factionalization as he entered the lame duck half of his term-limited six years in power.

This does not bode well for Duterte’s chosen successor in the next presidential elections scheduled for 2022. Outgoing Philippine presidents have had a poor track record in securing the election of their favored candidates. The national debut during the midterms of presidential daughter and Duterte’s successor as Davao mayor, Sara Duterte-Carpio, who is seen as the frontrunner to succeed her father, was flawed. Other factions are not holding back in a power struggle that will only intensify as the next presidential election nears, giving them a strong interest in preserving at least the basics of a democratic system to slug it out electorally.

Besides facing fierce if electorally weak opposition domestically, Duterte and his drug war have also been the subject of an ongoing investigation by the International Criminal Court (despite Philippine withdrawal under Duterte) and a newly launched investigation by the United Nations’ Human Rights commission, suggesting it is an issue that will not go away easily.

Duterte’s image as a tough guy (siga) also appears threatened by aggressive moves by China in the South China Sea and increasing Chinese immigration into the Philippines, particularly related to online gambling.

CONCLUSION

In both the Philippines and Thailand, middle-class ambivalence toward democracy articulated by leading intellectuals was manifested in successful efforts to overthrow “pro-poor” populist leaders. But in Thailand, a broad-based civilian coalition between the urban middle class-supported Future Forward Party and pro-Thaksin forces emerged to contest the military junta’s thinly veiled effort to civilianize its rule.

In the Philippines, while still broadly popular, Duterte has begun losing support among the middle class, as he faces a political opposition, though still weak, backed by leading intellectuals and the Catholic Church. With a succession battle shaping up within an oversized ruling coalition, in which Duterte is constitutionally banned from running, calls for change in foreign policy and safeguarding human rights may contribute to increasing political pluralism.

In the Philippines and Thailand, middle class remorse about democracy lost now appears the best hope for its return.

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