
DEMOCRACY AND THE THAI MIDDLE CLASS

Globalization, Modernization, and Constitutional Change

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Abstract

Although democratization in Thailand is often seen as an illustration of modernization theory, the extent of middle class support for democracy is actually unclear. The greatest advance for Thai democracy in the 1990s was the passage of the 1997 Constitution, more closely linked to economic globalization than modernization.

Thai democratization in the 1990s is commonly characterized as a classic case of modernization theory in action. The modernization argument holds that economic development in Thailand created a substantial, well-educated urban middle class that wanted accountable democratic government. Thus, when a military coup overthrew a fledgling democratic regime in 1991, it led to middle class protests in 1992 that ejected the junta and put Thailand firmly on the path to democratic consolidation. These events purportedly demonstrated that military governments are no longer tenable in the face of middle-class demands for democracy.

Does modernization theory provide an accurate account of the Thai case? Close examination of the evidence shows that it does not. The Thai middle class cannot be characterized as having coherent political preferences. Some

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in the middle class are pro-democracy, while some are not. Other groups in Thai society are similarly divided, and many members of these groups also participated in the 1992 demonstrations. Furthermore, it is unclear to what degree the 1992 demonstrations were really about democracy; arguably, they had more to do with suspicions of official corruption.

If modernization does not account for democratization in Thailand, what does? This paper develops an alternative hypothesis, that economic globalization provides a better explanation for Thai democratization than modernization. Economic growth in Thailand was based on foreign capital, and created a globalized economy sensitive to the confidence of international capital markets. A perception that these capital markets favored democratic regimes and political stability changed the political calculus in Thailand, shifting it firmly toward liberal democracy in the wake of the 1997 currency crisis. This analysis does not claim that globalization caused anyone to become more pro-democratic, or that it operated to the exclusion of domestic political and social factors, but rather that it impinged on local politics in a way that advantaged those who already advocated greater democratization.

Since the currency crisis, Thailand has defied two pieces of conventional wisdom. The first is that financial crises tend to undermine democracy.¹ In this case, economic suffering stabilized democracy—at least in the short run—by checking the activities of those opposed to a new constitution. The second is that the activities of international capital tend to undermine democracy, preferring undemocratic governments or “low-intensity democracy” that can provide stable, predictable pro-business economic environments.² In Thailand, financial liberalization and increasingly free flows of capital did promote economic instability,³ but a perceived preference for political stability on the part of international investors kept the democratic transition on track.

Below I argue against modernization theory as an explanation of democratization in Thailand. I then develop the hypothesis that economic globalization provides a better explanation for democratization in the 1990s. While conclusive proof is elusive, there is considerable evidence suggesting support for the hypothesis. I conclude with some thoughts about the future of democracy in Thailand, given my argument about globalization.

1. For instance, Adam Przeworski et al., “What Makes Democracies Endure?” *Journal of Democracy* 7 (January 1996).

2. Barry Gills, Joel Rocamora, and Richard Wilson, *Low Intensity Democracy: Political Power in the New World Order* (Boulder, Colo.: Pluto Press, 1993).

3. Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, “The Political Economy of the Thai Crisis,” *Journal of the Asia Pacific Economy* 4:1 (1999).

The Argument Against Modernization: The 1991 Coup and 1992 Protests

Modernization theorists argue that economic development leads to the rise of a pro-democratic, politically empowered middle class.⁴ The causal logic differs according to different authors, but the core of modernization theory remains this connection between economic growth, the rise of a middle class, and democracy. In Barrington Moore's famous dictum, "No bourgeoisie, no democracy."⁵ Although widely criticized from a variety of perspectives,⁶ modernization theory has retained its appeal as a generic, coherent, off-the-shelf explanation for democratization. The global wave of democratization in the late 1980s and early 1990s was commonly explained with reference to modernization.⁷

In Thailand as elsewhere, the middle class is notoriously difficult to define. Most observers would concur that an urban middle class had developed in Thailand by the early 1990s,⁸ but few would agree on who is included in that middle class. For instance, should university students be included, on the assumption that their education and expectations of future employment align them with white-collar workers? What about low-wage white-collar workers, such as sales clerks? Bureaucrats and military officers? Should business owners or wealthy farmers be considered middle class, or part of a separate business or capitalist class? The definition of middle class can be quite flexible depending on how such questions are answered. Most analyses of "middle class" political activism refer to the urban white-collar workers, profes-

4. Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics* (New York: Anchor Books, 1960), pp. 27–53; and Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), pp. 66–68.

5. Barrington Moore, Jr., *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966).

6. For instance, Zehra F. Arat, "Democracy and Economic Development: Modernization Theory Revisited," *Comparative Politics* 21:3 (October 1988); Terry Lynn Karl, "Dilemmas of Democratization in Latin America," *Comparative Politics* 23:1 (October 1990). Particularly important for the argument presented here is the critique of Dietrich Rueschmeyer, Evelyne Huber Stevens, and John D. Stevens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), that the middle class never advances democracy on its own, and democratization movements always require some working-class support.

7. Lucian Pye, for instance, argues that the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union represented a vindication of modernization theory: "Political Science and the Crisis of Authoritarianism," *American Political Science Review* 84:1 (March 1990), p. 7. More generally, see Huntington, *The Third Wave*.

8. Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thailand's Boom and Bust* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1998), pp. 149, 233–34; Chris Dixon, *The Thai Economy: Uneven Development and Internationalization* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

sionals, and business owners that Ockey dubs the “new rich,” and I will use the term in a similar way.⁹

The Thai middle class has clearly grown as the economy has expanded and diversified. It is now larger, better educated, and more influential, as modernization theory would predict. However, the claims of modernization theory with respect to Thailand must be qualified on two points. First, the Thai middle class is not a purely indigenous development. The economic growth that generated the middle class has been financed largely through imported capital, from the massive U.S. infusion of cash during the Vietnam War through the investment boom of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Second, it is doubtful that the Thai middle class is intrinsically pro-democratic. It is both structurally and politically diverse,¹⁰ and the events of 1991–92 demonstrate that it cannot be seen as uniformly advocating democracy. Many members of the middle class are pro-democratic, participated in the 1992 demonstrations, and have supported non-governmental organization (NGO)-inspired activism since. Others are nervous about the capacity of democratic governments to make good public policy, and are critical of the perceived cupidity of party politicians. Indeed, Albritton and Thawilwadee have found that the urban middle class in Thailand is considerably less satisfied with democracy than are rural and low-income groups.¹¹

Many conservative members of the middle class would prefer to see the restoration of a version of the “demi-democracy” of the early 1980s. In this system, non-elected Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanond, a retired general, presided over an elected parliament with military approval. A technocratic elite in the bureaucracy was permitted to make policy.¹²

In the late 1980s, this “demi-democracy” evolved into short-lived full democracy when Prem resigned, and was replaced by Chatichai Choonhavan. Although a former military officer himself, Chatichai was also an elected member of parliament and the head of a political party that formed a coalition government. Some members of his cabinet were poorly educated rural politicians who could deliver votes but were perceived by urban middle-class voters as entering government solely to make money through kickbacks, influence-peddling and other forms of corruption. There was widespread sentiment that the Chatichai government was dominated by these grasping,

9. Jim Ockey, “Creating the Thai Middle Class,” in Michael Pinches, ed., *Culture and Privilege in Capitalist Asia* (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 230–50.

10. Ibid.

11. Robert Albritton and Thawilwadee Bureekul, “Developing Democracy under a New Constitution in Thailand: A Pluralist Solution,” paper presented at the Midwest Political Science Association Annual Conference, Chicago, April 22, 2001.

12. The term “demi-democracy” comes from Likhit Dhiravegin, *Demi-Democracy: The Evolution of the Thai Political System* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1992).

semi-legitimate provincial businessmen who saw politics as a transaction in which they expected a profit from the cash they invested in buying votes.¹³

In 1991, a military junta calling itself the National Peacekeeping Council (NPKC) overthrew this democratically elected government, accusing Chatichai of presiding over a phenomenally corrupt cabinet. The NPKC claimed that it was acting for the good of the country, preserving Thailand from what it termed a “dictatorship of parliament called democracy.” Once the government was cleaned up, and the Constitution rewritten to prevent further corruption, the council pledged to hold new elections.

The 1991 coup seems to have been widely accepted. Prior to the coup, both corruption and the perception that democratic institutions had privileged narrow interests had sapped support for democracy in Thailand, even among intellectuals, NGOs, and activists.¹⁴ One prominent Thai academic, for instance, wrote an opinion piece in a popular newsmagazine in which he asked, “What difference is there between military dictatorship and a dictatorship of swindlers?”¹⁵ The rhetorical question was answered by an expert in constitutional law: “If we have no alternative but to choose between military authoritarianism and an elected government headed by crooked businessmen-cum-politicians, then I would opt for the former.”¹⁶ Thus, Anek has argued that middle-class opinion leaders created the conditions for the 1991 coup through their relentless criticism of the Chatichai government.¹⁷ Protests against the coup were small and sporadic.

The coup actually inspired hope in some people who, given the logic of modernization theory, should have been strongly opposed to it. For instance, an economics professor at one of Bangkok’s elite universities wrote an editorial in a popular newsmagazine aimed at the middle class in which she sym-

13. The provincial boss who bought votes and sought to use political influence to land contracts was (and is) a very real figure in Thai politics. See Somrudee Nicro, “Thailand’s NIC Democracy: Studying from General Elections,” *Pacific Affairs* 66:2 (Summer 1993); Pasuk Phongpaichit and Sungsidh Piriyarangsarn, *Corruption and Democracy in Thailand* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1994), chapter 3; and Philip S. Robertson, Jr., “The Rise of the Rural Network Politician: Will Thailand’s New Elite Endure?” *Asian Survey* 36:9 (September 1996).

14. Anek Laothamatas, *Mob Muethue* [The mobile phone mob] (Bangkok: Matichon, 1993), pp. 77–80.

15. Khian Thirawit, “Khwanphotham Kong Ratthaban Yu Khiangkhu Kap Khwanphuea Rawang Prathet” [The justice of government goes together with international trust], *Sayam Rat Sapda Wican* [Siam Rat Weekly Review] 37:23 (November 18, 1990), p. 17. The argument of this article is, interestingly, framed in terms of foreign perceptions of Thailand.

16. Pongpen Sakuntapai, quoted in Anek, “A Tale of Two Democracies: Conflicting Perceptions of Elections and Democracy in Thailand,” in R. H. Taylor, ed., *The Politics of Elections in Southeast Asia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 213.

17. Anek, *The Mobile Phone Mob*, Chapter 2; and “A Tale of Two Democracies: Conflicting Perceptions of Elections and Democracy in Thailand,” in R. H. Taylor, ed., *The Politics of Elections in Southeast Asia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 209–18.

pathized with the NPKC's stated purpose of reducing corruption. She optimistically called on the junta to open up greater dialogue in the Thai political system, to include excluded voices, and to reform the Constitution using business management models that would give incentives to patriotic, competent, and pure-hearted individuals to enter politics.¹⁸

There was relatively little protest over the 1991 coup. Despite the fact that a democratically elected government had been overthrown, no crowds emerged in Bangkok as they would under quite different circumstances in 1992. The *Far Eastern Economic Review* reported at the time that the coup "was widely accepted, almost popular."¹⁹ Indeed, the Thai stock market rose after the coup—particularly after the NPKC named well-respected diplomat and businessman Anand Panyarachun as prime minister (see Figure 1).

The Anand government was popular among the urban middle class, despite its undemocratic origins. Indeed, its undemocratic origins provided the basis of its popularity. As an unelected government, it was not beholden to any party or interest group, and was able to forge ahead with a number of badly needed reforms, including infrastructure projects for Bangkok. Furthermore, Anand was free to appoint a cabinet of technocrats without party affiliations, one that was perceived as unsullied by the money politics typical of elected politicians. Although a return to the practices of demi-democracy, the government was clearly supported by the urban middle class.²⁰

Because Anand had not previously been associated with the coup group, his appointment reinforced the impression that the NPKC was acting for the good of the country, rather than from selfish motives. The NPKC also investigated members of the Chatichai government euphemistically dubbed "unusually wealthy." In addition, it appointed a constitutional drafting committee, although the junta-dominated parliament eventually amended a number of its recommendations.²¹ In 1992, the council held new elections under the revised Constitution, which resembled earlier constitutions written by the

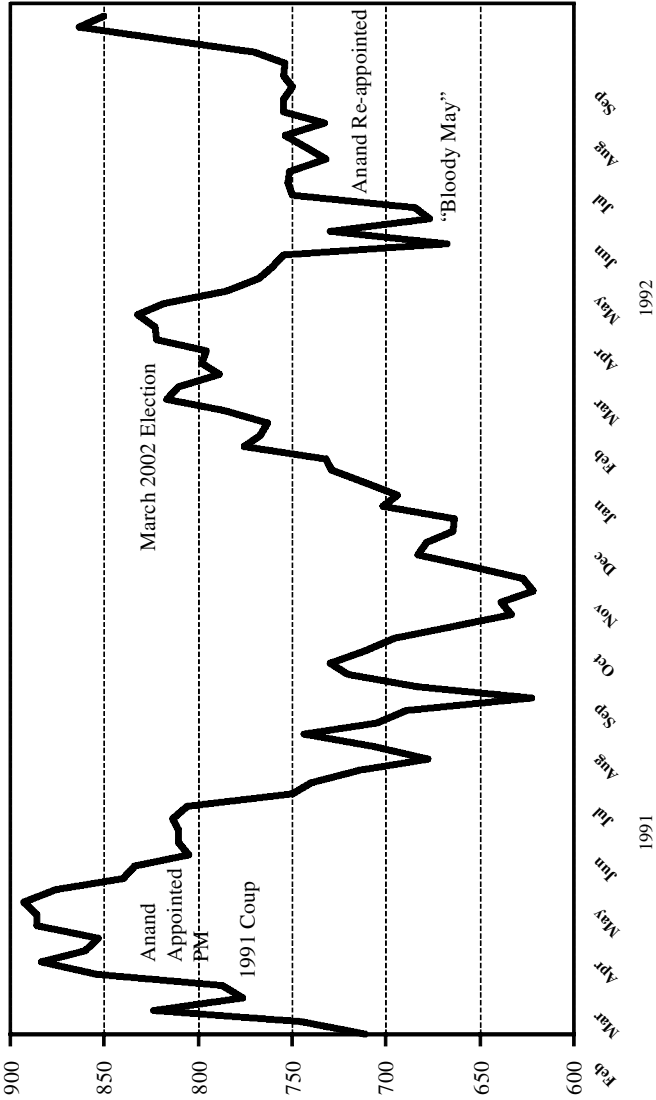
18. Suwinai Phonwalang, "Thahan Yuet Amnat! Kwat Ban—Lang Rebob 'Thurakit Kanmueang,' [Soldiers seize power! Sweep house, clean up the system of 'business politics'] *Sayam Rat Sapda Wican* [Siam Rat Weekly Review] (March 10, 1997), 37:39, pp. 17–18. The claim that there was a "dictatorship" of parliament was based on the fact that parliament could only be dissolved before its term expired by a vote of no-confidence—in other words, only parliament could dissolve parliament. The accusation of "dictatorship" was apparently taken seriously by many observers who had been frustrated by the cupidity of the Chatichai government. See, for instance, Suchit Bunbongkan, "Prachathipatai: Kapkonlakai Thang Kankuapkhum Nakkamueang" [Democracy: A mechanism to control politicians] *Sayam Rat Sapda Wican* [Siam Rat Weekly Review] 37: 39 (March 10, 1997), pp. 21–22.

19. Rodney Tasker, "Popular Putsch," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, March 7, 1991, p. 17.

20. Anek, "A Tale of Two Democracies," p. 218.

21. Rodney Tasker, "Tactical Compromise," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, December 5, 1991, p. 133.

FIGURE 1 SET Index Movements 1991–1992



SOURCE: *Far Eastern Economic Review* February 1991–September 1992.

Thai military that provided for a powerful senate appointed by the NPKC, allowed for an unelected prime minister (that is, one not elected to a seat in parliament), and vested control over elections in the Ministry of the Interior.

This election was marred by vote-buying, intimidation of voters and political opponents, and party-switching by elected politicians after the poll. However, these practices have all been common in recent Thai elections.²² The magnitude of the offenses in 1992 may have been somewhat greater, but they did not represent a qualitative change in Thai democracy. Furthermore, at least some candidates from all parties were guilty. As in all Thai elections, there were complaints about the polling, but this did not trigger widespread protests at the time. Nor were there protests over the fact that the NPKC's favored party, Samakkhi Tham (Unity and Virtue), emerged with the largest number of seats, and was able to form a government.

Protests did not begin until a full month after the election, in response to the selection of the prime minister. General Suchinda Kraprayoon, the leader of the coup group, had promised that he would not assume the prime ministership. This was meant to demonstrate his selflessness and underscore that the NPKC had been acting for the good of the nation rather than out of self-interest. However, the NPKC's favored candidate for prime minister, Narong Wongwan of the Samakkhi Tham Party, was compromised by accusations of drug smuggling. When these appeared to be confirmed by news that the United States had denied Narong a visa because of suspicions of heroin trafficking, his position became untenable. Suchinda stepped into the breach, and was appointed prime minister, although he had not been elected to parliament. Under the Thai Constitution at the time, this was perfectly legal, and there was ample precedent in the appointment of earlier unelected (and popular) prime ministers, Prem and Anand.

Although many activists claimed later that one of the primary problems with Suchinda's appointment was that he had not been elected, the positive reception given to Anand under even more clearly undemocratic circumstances suggests there was more to the reaction against Suchinda. Indeed, Anand had a second, equally acclaimed term as unelected prime minister following Suchinda's fall, despite the fact that elected leaders in parliament were available and willing to serve. Suchinda was seen as having lied about his desire to become premier, and the more cynical even interpreted Narong's troubles as a setup to enable Suchinda to step in as PM after the election.

22. On vote buying, see Suchit Bunbongkorn, "Elections and Democratization in Thailand," in R. H. Taylor, ed., *The Politics of Elections in Southeast Asia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 191-95. On factionalism and party-switching, see James Ockey, "Political Parties, Factions and Corruption in Thailand," *Modern Asian Studies* 28:2 (1994). The perception of vote-buying may be more widespread than its actual occurrence, though. See Albritton and Thawilwadee, "Developing Democracy."

Public confidence in the selfless intentions of the NPKC had already been eroded by a series of gaffes and minor scandals in the preceding months. It was further battered by the fact that Suchinda's cabinet included several of the "unusually wealthy" politicians whose ostensible corruption had justified the NPKC coup. This was a major strategic blunder by Suchinda, one that seriously undermined his claim to superior virtue.

The impression of selfishness and double-dealing by Suchinda changed the context in which many people retrospectively evaluated the NPKC coup. The NPKC's claim to selfless virtue was undermined, and the coup was now seen as greedy, self-interested, and corrupt. The 1992 protests, I would argue, were thus more about corruption than democracy in any formal, procedural, or even populist sense.

This democratic election and the procedurally correct appointment of the prime minister produced the events usually referred to in English as the 1992 democracy protests but which in Thai are generally called "Bloody May" or "Terrible May" (*Preusaphathamin*), or more neutrally, the "events" of May (*hetkan Preusaphakhom*). The demonstrations began with a hunger strike by veteran protestor Chalard Vorachart. Chalard had engaged in hunger strikes before, for a variety of causes, and was considered a minor, even eccentric figure in Thai politics. In this case, his protest struck a nerve. The crowds that gathered around Chalard swelled when he was joined in his hunger strike by the well-known politician Chamlong Srimuang; approximately 200,000 were there at the peak of the demonstrations. Famous for his ascetic lifestyle, Chamlong had an unbeatable reputation for being upright and incorruptible.²³ Chalard's use of the hunger strike as a means of protest—in other words, a strategy of self-denial—coupled with Chamlong's reputation for asceticism and honesty, made a powerful counterpoint to what was popularly perceived as dishonest and selfish behavior by Suchinda.

Thus, the events of May 1992 were less about democracy than about corruption, in the broad sense of greedy and selfish actions undertaken by those claiming to selflessly represent the public good. The language popularly used to discuss those events pits "the people" against "the military," but "the people" are represented more as passive victims of military aggression and greed than as outraged sovereigns exercising their Lockean right to rebel in the name of democratic government.²⁴

23. For the best account of Chamlong and his career, see Duncan McCargo, *Chamlong Srimuang and the New Thai Politics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).

24. On popular and media constructions of the "mob," see William A. Callahan, *Imagining Democracy: Reading the "Events of May" in Thailand* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1998); and Ockey, "Creating the Thai Middle Class," pp. 242–45.

Middle Class Demonstrations?

At least some of these demonstrators were middle class. This novel dimension of the demonstrations was strongly emphasized in the Thai media, which described cell phone-wielding demonstrators pulling up in their Mercedes.²⁵ A survey by the Social Science Association of Thailand on the evening of May 17 indicates that 52% of the demonstrators had at least a bachelor's degree, and 15% had a higher degree. Students represented 8% of demonstrators, and laborers and slum dwellers accounted for only 10%. Income figures from the survey appear to show the crowd was quite wealthy, rather than merely middle class: 46% of the individual protestors earned 10,000–50,000 baht per month (at that time, USD\$390–\$1,950), while median household income in Bangkok was around 10,000 baht per month in 1992.²⁶ All these results have been seen as demonstrating the middle class, even elite, composition of the crowd, which would appear to conform to the expectations of modernization theory.

Other accounts have disputed how thoroughly middle class the crowd was.²⁷ Sungsidh and Pasuk point out that the Social Science Association survey was conducted in the early evening, when the largest number of white-collar demonstrators were present.²⁸ Although the figures from this survey have been widely reported, nothing is ever said about its methodology, so it is impossible to evaluate the possibility of selection bias. As David Murray has argued, the media emphasized middle-class participation because of its novelty, while “in reality everyone was there.”²⁹

An alternative source of data on the composition of the crowd is provided by casualty figures from the shootings of May 17–21. These provide a different impression than the Social Science Association survey. While the casu-

25. Callahan, *Imagining Democracy*, pp. 44–47; and James Ockey, “On the Expressway, and Under It: Representations of the Middle Class, the Poor, and Democracy in Thailand,” in Yao Souchou, ed., *House of Glass: Culture, Modernity and the State in Asia* (Singapore: Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, 2000), pp. 313–14.

26. Sungsidh Piriyanrangan and Pasuk Phongpaichit, “Introduction: The Middle Class and Democracy in Thailand,” in Pasuk and Sungsidh, eds., *The Middle Class and Thai Democracy/Chonchan Klang Bon Krasae Prachathipitai Thai* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Faculty of Economics, The Political Economy Centre, 1993), p. 28; and National Statistical Office, Office of the Prime Minister, *Report of the Social Attitude of Population [sic] Survey 1993*, Bangkok, 1993, p. 10.

27. For instance, Voravidh Chernlertin, “Chonchan Klang Kap Hetkan Pruetsaphakhom” [The middle class and the events of May] in Pasuk and Sungsidh, eds., *The Middle Class and Thai Democracy*, pp. 116–53; David Murray, *Angels and Devils: Thai Politics from February 1991 to September 1992—A Struggle for Democracy?* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1996); Chamlong Srimuang’s memoir of the events, *Ruam Kan Su [Unite to fight]* (Bangkok: Kled Thai, 1997); and Callahan, *Imagining Democracy*.

28. Sungsidh and Pasuk, “Introduction,” pp. 72–73.

29. David Murray, *Angels and Devils*, p. 141.

TABLE 1 *Casualty Figures from the May 17–21, 1992, Shootings*

	<i>Casualty Figures</i>			<i>Bangkok Population %</i>
	<i>Dead</i>	<i>Injured</i>	<i>Total %</i>	
White collar/professional	6	78	38	43
Sales	4	15	9	17
Laborers	16	49	29	32
Students	10	22	14	7
Unemployed	1	6	3	2
Other	1	6	3	0
Unknown	5	3	4	NA
<i>Total</i>	43	179	100	100

SOURCES: Vorawith Chernlertin in Sungsidh and Pasuk, eds., *The Middle Class and Thai Democracy*, pp. 144–47, and the National Statistical Office, *Quarterly Bulletin of Statistics* 42:1 (March 1994), pp. 17–19.

alty figures do not represent a perfectly representative sample of the crowd, they are the only alternative source of numerical data.³⁰ Table 1 compares the casualty figures to official demographic data on the Bangkok metropolitan area.³¹ The demographic data are not strictly comparable to the casualty figures, since different categories are employed. In Table 1, some categories have been combined to achieve rough comparability. In all cases, this study has been as generous as possible to the modernization argument by including

30. The shooting began on Sunday night, and families and those who had to be up early for work the next day were likely to have departed. Also, the reader should bear in mind that these casualty statistics are not complete. Estimates vary widely. The NPKC appears to have disposed of at least some bodies without recording them in the official numbers later released by the military. Furthermore, not all the casualties were necessarily participants; eyewitness accounts suggest a number of curious onlookers and innocent bystanders were also killed. On this issue, see Vincent Iacopino and Sidney Jones, *"Bloody May": Excessive Use of Lethal Force in Bangkok* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1992). The figures presented here were compiled by NGOs from hospital records and represent a very conservative estimate of the total casualties.

31. The Labor Force Survey in the National Statistical Office's *Quarterly Bulletin of Statistics* 42:1 (March 1994) has been used for demographic data, because other groups not in the labor force (e.g., the very young, the very old or those unable to work) were unlikely to participate in the demonstration. Exceptions are the unemployed and students, who are not included in the Labor Force Survey. Figures for the unemployed and students specific to Bangkok were not available, so I used figures for the country as a whole, recalculating the proportions for the various labor force categories when the additional people were included.

any doubtful cases in the middle class categories, thus inflating the middle class as a proportion of the casualties.³²

Despite being the largest single category, white-collar and professional workers are underrepresented among the casualties. If we had better information, the middle class would almost certainly emerge even more severely underrepresented, because the white-collar category actually includes an unknown number of salaried blue-collar workers and low-wage white-collar clerks. Nor can the student population simply be added to the middle class on the assumption that they were yuppies in the making. It is striking that none of the students came from the elite institutions, despite the fact that the shootings took place mere yards from one of the best, Thammasat University. Most of the students were enrolled in technical schools or the enormous Ramkhamhaeng open university; the rest were in high school. Students are the group most over-represented among the casualties.

Furthermore, we have no idea what proportion of the middle class stayed at home because they supported Suchinda, or at least accepted him as prime minister. Some observers think there was substantial middle class support for the NPKC. One Thai academic, for instance, writes that "the Bloody May incident revealed the continuance of an authoritarian culture and the strength of conservative interest groups in Thai society, especially within the middle class, that challenge human rights."³³ Indeed, Anand's two extraconstitutional terms as PM bracketed the anti-Suchinda demonstrations, and yet were acclaimed by many who participated in those demonstrations. The Thai middle class was thus not particularly pro-democratic in 1992, at least in a procedural sense.

After May 1992, Thai society was characterized by lively political debate, and the political situation was quite fluid. A new constitution was drafted through a process that included considerable popular consultation, and it is more democratic than any of its predecessors. The Constitution provides for an elected senate, whereas previous senates have been appointed. It establishes an independent election commission, removing an important conflict of interest, since previously the Ministry of the Interior under an elected member of parliament (MP) sitting in the cabinet had organized elections. It also

32. Specifically, I lumped the groups labeled "professional and technical," "clerical," "administrative/executive," and "service" in the official Labor Force Survey into a single "white collar" category. On the casualty side, "large business owners," "professional" and "salaried" are all lumped into the "white collar" category. Peddlers in the casualty figures have been included in the "sales" category, since the Labor Force Survey does not distinguish between street vendors and Mercedes Benz salespeople, for instance. Also, "farmers" in the labor force survey have been folded into the category of "laborers." I have used my own judgement in placing the specific occupations listed for the dead into the above categories.

33. Jaran Cosananund, "Authoritarian Culture and the Struggle for Human Rights in Thailand," *Human Rights Dialogue* 31 (December 1995), p. 7.

requires that the prime minister be an elected MP, whereas earlier constitutions permitted any Thai citizen to be appointed premier. The adoption of this Constitution in 1997 marked the single greatest advance for Thai democracy in the 1990s, if only for these three reasons.³⁴

If modernization theory fails as an explanation of democratization in Thailand, how are we to account for this more democratic Constitution? It was written largely by pro-democracy intellectuals, albeit with wide public consultation. Its approval by parliament was in fact far from certain, prior to the currency crash of 1997. Important social groups, including some members of the middle class, opposed it on various grounds. However, the currency crisis paradoxically advanced the cause of democracy, because Thai elites recognized that allaying the fears of foreign suppliers of capital required projecting an image of unity, stability, and political progress. Economic globalization thus shifted the political ground in ways that advantaged proponents of the Constitution, who were able to deploy the economy and the perceived importance of foreign investor confidence as elements in an argument for reform.

The Argument for Globalization: The Currency Crisis and the New Constitution

The forces of economic globalization contributed powerfully to Thai democratization in the 1990s. Thailand has steadily integrated into international trade and financial networks since the mid-1980s, and one consequence has been increased vulnerability to international public opinion, especially among investors. The perception that investors were worried about political instability and preferred democratic regimes helped democracy activists push for the unamended passage of a new constitution—aided in part by the currency collapse of 1997.

By 1997 Thailand was deeply involved in international trade and financial networks. Because of a financial market liberalization program begun in the mid-1980s, it became much easier for Thai firms and individuals to borrow abroad. Thailand was considered creditworthy, so foreign lenders responded with alacrity. The Thai economy became highly dependent on foreign funds, which went from 59% of the country's total debt in 1988 to 94% in 1997.

34. The Constitution also contains an extensive section on human rights protections and sets up various new oversight bodies, including an administrative court, a human rights tribunal and a National Counter-Corruption Commission. The effectiveness of these bodies is disputed, particularly in the wake of the acquittal of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra on charges of hiding assets. The Constitution also contains a couple of more dubious provisions, including a provision to restrict the political rights of citizens who fail to vote and a requirement that all candidates for parliament have a university degree, discussed below.

Furthermore, this debt was increasingly in short-term obligations, making Thai capital markets highly sensitive to international market fluctuations, and to international perceptions of Thai stability and creditworthiness.³⁵ The rapid expansion of credit created an investment bubble, with which existing Thai regulatory institutions were not equipped to cope.

The bubble popped in the summer of 1997, when declining exports put pressure on the artificially pegged value of the baht. Because few of the dollar-denominated loans that financed the bubble were hedged against changes in currency values, they suddenly became much more expensive to repay with baht, driving many into default. At the same time, imports became much more expensive, and the value of personal incomes and savings dropped sharply.

International investors were predictably alarmed by the crash. Moody's Investor Service downgraded Thailand's sovereign debt from an A3 to a Baa1 rating, indicating that they thought Thai government bonds now lacked "outstanding investment characteristics and in fact [had] speculative characteristics as well."³⁶ The Economist Intelligence Unit raised Thailand's investment risk score from 38 in the second quarter of 1997 to a high of 56 for the first quarter of 1998, indicating concern about "a record of foreign exchange crises and political problems."³⁷ Standard and Poor's also downgraded their long-term rating for the baht.³⁸ All these moves were based at least in part on political uncertainty surrounding the draft constitution, and they were widely reported in the Thai press.

Economic suffering generated fears of undemocratic intervention in politics, such as military pressure on the elected government, the installation of an unelected prime minister, or even a coup.³⁹ There was ample historical

35. Pedro Alba, Leonardo Hernandez, and Daniela Klingbiel, *Financial Liberalization and the Capital Account, Thailand 1988-97*, World Bank Policy Research Working Paper 2188, September 1999, p. 24. Between 1988-96, foreign-capital inflows amounted to an average of 9.4% of Thailand's GDP per year. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

36. *Moody's International Manual 1998*, vol. 4 (N.Y.: Moody's Investor Service, 1998), p. 9607, and *Moody's International Manual 1999*, vol. 4 (N.Y.: Mergent FIS, 1999), pp. vi and 8147-49.

37. Economist Intelligence Unit, *Country Risk Service: Thailand*, Second Quarter 1997 and First Quarter 1998. On the importance of such rating agencies, see Timothy J. Sinclair, "Passing Judgment: Credit Rating Processes as Regulatory Mechanisms of Governance in the Emerging World," *Review of International Political Economy* 1:1 (Spring 1994), pp. 133-59 and Saskia Sassen, *Losing Control? Sovereignty in an Age of Globalization* (N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1996), pp. 16-17.

38. *The Nation* (Bangkok), "Cost of Recession to Climb to Bt 750 Billion," August 2, 1997, pp. A1, B10; and *The Nation* (Bangkok), "Senate-Govt Bid to Hijack Draft Exposed," September 4, 1997, pp. A1, A6.

39. See, for instance, Michael Vatikiotis, "Crisis of Confidence," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, July 3, 1997, p. 24. The commander of the army felt compelled to publicly disclaim the

precedent for such intervention. Furthermore, because the civilian government appeared incompetent, there would probably have been some popular support for unelected leadership. Prem was in fact asked to return as PM by a group of business people and academics.⁴⁰ It is clear that many Thais mistrusted the ability of elected officials to deal with such crises, an attitude that is not unreasonable given Thailand's recent history of large, fractious coalition governments.

Rumors of a possible coup gained credence because there was already considerable division within Thai political and economic elites over the new Constitution. As the first Thai Constitution written with extensive public input, it clearly had support from urban middle-class and business groups. Rural support is more difficult to gauge. Pasuk Phongpaichit reports seeing water jars in a remote village spray-painted with slogans from the human rights provisions of the Constitution.⁴¹ On the other hand, in many areas there seems to have been widespread ignorance of the new Constitution.⁴² The Commune and Village Heads Association of Thailand claimed that there was widespread opposition to the draft, although it is unclear that the leadership of the organization was accurately representing the views of the rank and file.⁴³ Prominent members of the Constitution Drafting Assembly expressed doubts that the draft document would have passed in a referendum, because the Interior Ministry and politicians commanded resources in rural areas that would have enabled them to defeat it.⁴⁴

The draft constitution was opposed by a potentially powerful coalition of elites. Since we can never know what would have happened to the Constitution without the currency crisis, it is impossible to know whether this coal-

possibility of a coup. Rodney Tasker, "Hard Times Roll," *ibid.*, August 7, 1997, p. 27. At the same time, senior government officials were reported to be mobilizing the paramilitary Village Scouts, as they had to put down student protestors in 1976. See Michael Vatikiotis and Rodney Tasker, "Holding On," *ibid.*, August 28, 1997, p. 16. On the Village Scouts movement, see Katherine Ann Bowie, *Rituals of National Loyalty: An Anthropology of the State and the Village Scout Movement in Thailand* (N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1997). When the baht was devalued in 1984, Arthit Kamlang-ek, concurrently the commander-in chief of the army and supreme commander of the armed forces went on television to attack the government, and was widely perceived to be threatening a coup. Likhit, *Demi-Democracy*, p. 213.

40. *Sayam Rat Sapda Wican* [Siam Rat Weekly Analysis], "10 Duean Ratthaban 'Ciw,'" [10 Months of the Chavalit Government] 44: 17 (4 October, 1997), p. 10.

41. Pasuk Phongpaichit, *Civilizing the State: State, Civil Society and Politics in Thailand* (Amsterdam: Centre for Asian Studies, 1999), p. 13.

42. See, for instance, Chula Saengpassa, "Awareness Yet to Reach Grassroots," *The Nation* (Bangkok), September 4, 1997, p. A3.

43. *Ibid.*, "Village Leaders Step Up Moves Against the Charter," August 27, 1997, p. A3; and *ibid.*, "Opposition by Heads of Villages 'Insignificant,'" September 3, 1997, p. A3.

44. *Ibid.*, "Uthai Expects Charter to Fail in Referendum," August 21, 1997, p. A3; and *ibid.*, "Ultimate Hurdle Looms Large for Draft Constitution," August 15, 1997, p. A1.

tion could have blocked its passage or significantly amended it. There are, however, good reasons to think that they might have.

The Coalition Against the Constitution

The new Constitution made a number of changes to the Thai political system that threatened the primacy of groups that were powerful under the status quo. These included elements of the military, many elected politicians, and some members of the bureaucracy, most prominently the powerful Ministry of the Interior.

The leadership of the army consistently supported the new Constitution in public, and many officers who advocated greater professionalism in the Thai military were pleased with it. However, there were also rumblings of discontent.⁴⁵ Army Chief of Staff General Charn Boonprasert said that members of the Constitutional Drafting Assembly were “trying to stir tension and were misleading people to understand that the draft was a political panacea.” He threatened that a coup might ensue if this continued.⁴⁶

A military panel chaired by Deputy Supreme Commander Preecha Rojanasen specified desired revisions. These included eliminating Articles 63 and 65, which forbid any extra-constitutional acquisition of power, such as a coup, and give citizens the right to resist if this should happen. Article 40 was also considered problematic, because it required the armed forces to surrender their television and radio frequencies to a civilian telecommunications board.⁴⁷ Article 72, on the overall role of the armed forces, was criticized as being “unclear.” Under earlier constitutions, the military had a mandate to engage in social and economic development projects.⁴⁸ Initially a counter-insurgency tactic intended to undermine peasant support for the Communist Party of Thailand, such projects helped generate considerable political sup-

45. See Surachat Bamrungasuk, “Wiwata Ratthammanun: Tahan Kap Kanraksa Phonprayot Haeng Chat” [Constitutional dispute: Soldiers and safeguarding the interests of the nation] *Matichon Sut Sapda* [Matichon Weekender] 17:879 (24 June, 1997), pp. 31–32.

46. Wassana Nanuam, “Army Chief-of-Staff Says Coup Is Possible,” *Bangkok Post Online Edition*, September 2, 1997 <<http://www.bangkokpost.com/>>.

47. See *Matichon Sut Sapda* [Matichon Weekender], “Pha Rang Ratthammanun Chabap S. R. Du Matra ‘Antarai’,” [Split over the CDA draft constitution – A look at the ‘dangerous’ articles] 17:882 (May 6, 1997), p. 7; “Some Military Men Unhappy over Charter,” *Bangkok Post Online Edition*, September 5, 1997; and Wassana Nanuam, “Top Brass Prods PM to Back Draft,” *ibid.*, September 15, 1997. The military has since requested to keep control over 50 radio frequencies and one of its two television stations under the proposed organic law on telecommunications on grounds of national security. These frequencies have been a source of extra-budgetary income for the military, which leases air time on them. Wassana Nanuam, “Military Frequencies: Cash from Media Goes on Fun Trips,” *ibid.*, May 25, 1999.

48. For instance in the Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, 1991, Chapter 5, Section 60.

port for the military in rural areas.⁴⁹ Such a mandate was not explicitly given in the new Constitution. This may have encouraged supporters of greater professionalism in the military to publicly support the draft, including the commander of the army, Chetta Thanajaro, and the supreme commander of the Thai military, Mongkol Ampornpisit. However, the draft also threatened the aspirations of those who held the more traditional view that the military should act as a guardian of the nation by assuming political power in crisis situations.

A new electoral system also drew criticism from some politicians.⁵⁰ Changes in the electoral law generated uncertainty for politicians who had been successful under the old system. The new electoral law eliminated multi-member plurality districts for elections to the lower house. Formerly, candidates often competed against members of their own party in the same district. This tended to breed factionalism within parties, and weakened the control party leaders exercised over their MPs. It also helped to generate corruption and vote-buying, since it was difficult for two candidates from the same party to distinguish themselves in other ways, for instance on the basis of a party platform, or by claiming credit for local development projects.⁵¹

The new Constitution substitutes 400 seats elected from single-member plurality districts, with 100 additional seats elected by proportional representation from nationwide party lists.⁵² This system should reduce factionalism within parties and its attendant corruption, as well as reducing the number of political parties. While we will have to wait until the next lower-house election to see the first real impact on the Thai party system, there are signs that it is already in transition. In the first lower house election under the new Constitution, one party, Thaksin Shinawatra's *Thai Rak Thai* (Thai Love Thai) emerged with a majority for the first time in the history of Thai democracy.⁵³ Thaksin's government has subsequently added coalition partners who may well be folded into the party in the next election. Furthermore, complaints about his "dictatorial" style of command seem to reflect not just the fact that he heads a majority government but also greater control over his own party.

49. Chai-Anan Samudavanija, Kusuma Snitwongse, and Suchit Bunbongkarn, *From Armed Suppression to Political Offensive* (Bangkok: Institute of Strategic and International Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 1990); and M. Ladd Thomas, "Limited Disengagement of the Military from Thai Politics," in Constantine P. Danopoulos, ed., *Military Disengagement from Politics* (N.Y.: Routledge, 1988), pp. 120, 129–30.

50. See *Sayam Rat Sapda Wican* [Siam Rat Weekly Review], "Yaekthat 'Chavalit'" [Analyzing 'Chavalit'] 44:15 (September 20, 1997), pp. 11–12.

51. Ockey, *Political Parties*, p. 259.

52. Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, 1997, Article 98. For senate seats, which were formerly appointed, MMPD districts have been formed (Articles 102, 121–22). These elections are intended to be non-partisan (Article 126).

53. Old habits die hard: the Thaksin government promptly formed an oversized coalition.

Many politicians also disliked a requirement that elected officials disclose their assets before entering office, and again upon leaving. The National Counter-Corruption Commission (NCCC) is empowered to investigate allegations of the previously mentioned "unusual wealth" on the part of politicians and other officials.⁵⁴ The NCCC has been vigorous and evenhanded in its pursuit of officials. It has successfully challenged the very powerful, including Thaksin Shinawatra, the recently elected prime minister.⁵⁵

In a provision aimed explicitly at uneducated rural bosses, who many believe seek office only as a means to enrich themselves, the new Constitution also requires that candidates for parliament have a university degree.⁵⁶ Politicians in both the government and the opposition complained about this illiberal measure, which excludes nearly 95% of the population from running for parliament.⁵⁷ The rule reflects a disposition toward elitism and technocracy in the Thai public's conception of good government, also displayed in the positive reception received by the two appointed Anand administrations.

As with the military, politicians were divided over the new Constitution. The minor issue of whether to accept the draft constitution as complete seriously divided the government, requiring a cabinet reshuffle.⁵⁸ Some hoped that the new restrictions would reduce corruption and improve the image of parliament. Public criticism of the charter came primarily from the government of Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, but apparently was shared in private by opposition politicians as well. Some who publicly supported the Constitution were rumored to be plotting to amend it after passage. The reported reason was that it was "a bid to convince some elements to vote for the draft first to prevent constitutional conflict [from] further damaging the economy."⁵⁹

54. Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, 1997, Chapter 10, Parts 1 and 2.

55. Thaksin was narrowly acquitted in the courts, a result that has led some to suspect the NCCC is a toothless body. However, his prosecution clearly established the NCCC's authority to investigate and charge elected officials at the highest level.

56. Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, 1997, Article 107.

57. In 2000, 3.3 million Thais held university degrees, out of a population of 60.6 million. National Statistical Office, at <<http://www.nso.go.th/eng/stats/stat.htm>>, tables 1.1 and 1.15. Opponents of this article included Chuan Leekpai, head of the opposition Democratic Party and the embodiment of the kind of well-educated, non-military, policy-oriented politician attractive to urban middle class voters. *The Nation* (Bangkok), "Education Criteria Has Many MPs Up in Arms," September 6, 1997, p. A3; and Michael Vatikiotis, "People's Putsch," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, September 18, 1997, p. 15.

58. *Sayam Rat Sapda Wican* [Siam Rat Weekly Review], "Yup Sapha!" [Dissolution of Parliament!] 44:15 (September 20, 1997), pp. 6–10.

59. Wut Nontharit, "Secret Plot Unveiled," *Bangkok Post Online Edition*, September 12, 1997. The new Constitution is, in fact, quite easy to amend. See the Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, 1997, Chapter 12.

The Ministry of the Interior, which remains extremely powerful in the highly centralized Thai government, was also unhappy with the new charter. The Constitution included provisions for administrative decentralization, requiring the Ministry to surrender some authority to elected local assemblies and local administrative committees. It also created an administrative court system where citizens can lodge complaints against government officials.⁶⁰ Finally, the authority to organize and run elections was removed from the Interior Ministry and given to an independent Election Commission.⁶¹ This eliminated an obvious conflict of interest, since the Minister of the Interior is also an elected MP.

Given this coalition of military, political, and bureaucratic interests, there was concern even before devaluation that the new Constitution might be derailed. While it seems unlikely that any of these groups—or even all of them working in concert—could have blocked its passage and promulgation entirely, there was a danger that they could delay or amend it in significant ways. With the onset of the financial crisis, the future appeared even more uncertain.

In fact, the crisis arguably rescued the Constitution, promoted political stability, and improved the prospects for democracy. In the atmosphere of economic crisis, political stability was perceived as crucial to maintaining the confidence of investors—particularly the foreign banks and investors who were seen as vitally important to economic recovery. In 1997, 94% of Thailand's total debt was in foreign hands, much of it in unhedged short-term debt that was highly sensitive to lenders' willingness to roll over loans.⁶²

In the wake of the 1997 devaluation, virtually all important actors in Thai politics agreed that it was crucial to project an image of political stability. In order to do so, the constitutional reform process had to remain on track. This advantaged the pro-democracy forces in Thai society, and handicapped conservatives who would have preferred a return to "demi-democracy."

Three Crises of the Chavalit Government

Recognizing that a show of unity was crucial for sustaining investor confidence, the military leadership and other influential Thais initially backed the coalition government led by Chavalit Yongchaiyudh's New Aspiration Party, despite widespread misgivings about the government's competence to handle the crisis. The military publicly called for unity, and implied that the opposi-

60. Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, 1997, Chapter 8, Part 4.

61. Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, 1997, Chapter 6, Part 4. The minister of the interior, Sanoh Thienthong, went so far as to claim the communists were behind the draft constitution. Somchai Meesame and Supawadee Susanpoolthong, "Sanoh Says Communists Back Charter," *Bangkok Post Online Edition*, August 24, 1997.

62. Alba et al., "Financial Liberalization," p. 24.

tion ought to withdraw a scheduled censure motion against the government. Prem, as former unelected prime minister and still a privy councilor close to the king, expressed confidence in the Chavalit government. His endorsement brought with it the support of a large number of important military officers.⁶³ Top military officers accompanied Chavalit to his presentation of the new budget, something that had not happened since 1992.

Their support lasted from the devaluation, in July 1997, until September 1997, when the draft constitution was submitted to parliament for debate and ratification. Chavalit lost this support when he cooperated with the coalition against the Constitution, attempting first to delay, and then to amend it. In response, democracy activists began organizing demonstrations in Bangkok, giving an impression of political instability that alarmed foreign observers. This began to erode Chavalit's status as a symbol of political stability, which was virtually his only political asset, given the government's poor handling of the economic crisis.

The Chavalit government faced a dilemma in September. Many in the government did not like the new Constitution, particularly the provisions affecting elected officials and the organization of elections.⁶⁴ Nor were they alone: many opposition politicians expressed dissatisfaction with elements of the Constitution. Prominent opposition MP Pongpol Adireksarn voiced what seems to have been a common sentiment when he remarked, "There are some clauses I don't like, but because of the economy we have to accept it."⁶⁵

The economy became one of the most commonly cited reasons for passing the draft. Domestically, some saw the Constitution as a necessary salve for a population severely battered by the economic crisis.⁶⁶ However, the core reason was that passage of the draft was seen as necessary to promote an image of political stability abroad, to reassure foreign investors. A vice president at Bangkok Bank was quoted as saying that "capital inflow in the short term, which dominates local liquidity and interest rates, would depend mainly on whether the charter draft is approved. If it is not, foreign investors might be reluctant to move their money back into the country."⁶⁷ This position was

63. See, for instance, *Sayam Rat Sapda Wican* [Siam Rat Weekly Review], "77 Pi 'Ba Prem'" [77 Years of 'Father Prem'] 44:13 (August 31, 1997), pp. 8–9.

64. Chavalit himself is a former general and at one time supreme commander of the armed forces. During his tenure in the military, he argued that true democracy did not require elections, and expressed skepticism about the legitimacy of political parties. See Chai-Anan et al., *From Armed Suppression to Political Offensive*, pp. 147–48.

65. Quoted in Michael Vatikiotis, "People's Putsch," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, September 18, 1997, p. 15.

66. For instance, Nussara Yenprasert, "Meechai Calls on Senate to Back Draft," *The Nation* (Bangkok), August 24, 1997, p. A1.

67. Jiwamol Kanoksilp, "New, Able Government Should Guide Country," *ibid.*, August 12, 1997, p. A2.

echoed by a mixed group of government and opposition politicians with technical qualifications in economics interviewed on television by the influential publisher Sutichai Yoon, who all agreed that winning the confidence of international investors was critical, and that this depended on passing the draft constitution. They worried in particular that conflicts over the Constitution might “scare away foreign investors and frighten international creditors, prompting them not to roll over debts to Thai companies,” a situation which did indeed come to pass as the Chavalit government temporized.⁶⁸ Chavalit’s vacillation over the charter was widely blamed for further declines in the baht and the stock exchange.⁶⁹ The Economist Intelligence Unit consistently placed political instability due to constitutional change foremost among the investment risk in Thailand during this period, adding economic mismanagement only in the fourth quarter of 1997, as the baht began its plunge.⁷⁰ Intelligence Unit assessment of the political risks in Thailand had not been so dismal since the 1992 coup.⁷¹

The government first tried to delay the parliamentary debate, precipitating a drop in the stock market, as investors worried about political instability.⁷² It then tried to amend the Constitution, defying a clause that required parliament to vote on it without amendment. Considerable opposition emerged, with demonstrations in Bangkok to support the charter and protest the government’s maneuvering. The Minister of the Interior tried to muddy the issue by bringing 20,000 subordinates, mostly village headmen and other local officials, to Bangkok for a counter-demonstration, in an attempt to suggest the charter lacked popular support. With unrest growing, Supreme Commander Mongkol told the prime minister that he should support the draft constitution. He and Army Commander-in-Chief Chettha reportedly agreed that “the premier and his cabinet must accept the new charter or else ‘some parties’ might try to take advantage of the situation because they have already mobilized

68. *Ibid.*, “Economists Fear Misery if Charter Is Not Approved,” September 1, 1997, p. A6; and *ibid.*, “Businessmen Urge PM to Quit,” September 11, 1997, p. A1.

69. See, for instance, *ibid.* (Bangkok), “Baht Plunges on Widespread Fears,” September 3, 1997, p. B1; *Matichon* “At ‘Ciw’ Ton Het ‘Baht’ Wibat” [Pressed ‘Chavalit’ Cause of ‘Baht’ Calamity], September 4, 1997, pp. 1, 12; Piyanart Srivado, “Baht Decline Blamed on Talks, *The Nation* (Bangkok), September 5, 1997; *Matichon* “‘Ciw’ Cannon ‘Rap RTN’” [Chavalit surrenders, ‘accepts Const.’], September 6, 1997, p. 10; *The Nation* (Bangkok), “Boost for Baht, SET Index,” September 6, 1997, p. B10; and *ibid.*, “Stronger Baht Attributed to Draft Support,” September 9, 1997, p. A3.

70. Economist Intelligence Unit, *Country Risk Service: Thailand*, First Quarter 1997, p. 4; Second Quarter 1997, p. 2; Third Quarter 1997, p. 14; and Fourth Quarter 1997, pp. 2–3.

71. Economist Intelligence Unit, *Country Risk Service: Thailand*, First and Second Quarter, 1993.

72. Jiwamol Kanoksilp and Jirapreeya Keawkumnurpong, “SET Plunges on Delayed Charter Vote,” *The Nation* (Bangkok) Online Edition, September 11, 1997 (<http://www.nationmultimedia.com/>).

demonstrators,” apparently referring to democracy activists who were protesting the amendment attempt.⁷³ In the past, such a statement might well have been used to justify military intervention against the democracy activists, but in the context of the currency crisis it was transformed into a reason for the government to back down. Indeed, Chetta told reporters he was certain that there would be no coup because “everyone well knows that the country now has economic problems.”⁷⁴

Faced with this public show of support for the Constitution by the military, as well as growing protests, the Chavalit government gave in and passed the draft constitution. This precipitated a second crisis. During the 1996 election, Chavalit had promised to resign after promulgation of the newly passed Constitution by the king. Now, however, he proved reluctant to do so. It was unclear whether resignation was actually appropriate: the mechanism for holding elections under the new Constitution was not in place, and the transitional provisions in the Constitution stipulated that if parliament dissolved, the senate would sit as a National Assembly. They would then have the benefit of creating the Organic Laws that would make the provisions of the Constitution a legal reality. Most of the senators had been appointed by the leaders of the 1991 coup, and their control over this critical stage of the process would have been problematic. On the other hand, if Chavalit did not dissolve parliament, why should his democratically elected government resign in favor of the opposition?

The Chavalit government was, however, increasingly unpopular because of spreading economic problems, and faced growing protests demanding its resignation. In October 1997, Chavalit asked the military to step in, to impose a curfew and media censorship. The military refused, with army commander Chetta reportedly saying as he left the meeting that “no leader with mental stability would opt for this choice.”⁷⁵ The government announced its intention to resign.

The resignation prompted a third crisis: who would replace Chavalit? Normal practice in Thailand is to give the leader of the second-largest party the opportunity to form a new government before calling new elections. With nearly as many seats in parliament as Chavalit’s New Aspiration Party, the Democrats under Chuan Leekpai had a reasonably good chance of forming a new coalition. Chavalit resisted, and there was some popular support at this point for calling in an unelected prime minister. The most prominent name being bruited was that of Prem. Many people, particularly in the business community, appeared to think that an unelected prime minister could deal

73. Wassana, “Top Brass Prods PM to Back Draft.”

74. *Mathichon*, “RTN Buan” [Const. confusion], September 5, 1997, p. 15.

75. Quoted in Michael Vatikiotis, “Democracy First,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, November 6, 1997, p. 20.

with the economic crisis more decisively than an elected government. They looked back with nostalgia to the active and effective administration of Anand. The king, who was responsible for appointing any prime minister, elected or otherwise, weighed in against this option, as did the military.⁷⁶ Chavalit ultimately resigned, and Chuan formed a seven-party coalition government.

In the three crises of the Chavalit government, there was a repeated, and somewhat ironic, pattern. The elected government repeatedly attempted to derail the new Constitution, and the military repeatedly intervened on the side of democracy. Yet, it was ultimately the Thai economy's dependence on foreign capital that propelled the passage of the Constitution. Given that such international factors affect many countries, it is worthwhile asking how common the phenomenon might be.

A Comparative Perspective

Is the Thai case unique? The Thai middle class, with its ambivalence toward democracy, is not so different from the middle classes of other Southeast Asian countries.⁷⁷ Middle classes in Singapore and Malaysia appear to accept undemocratic governments, and the Indonesian middle class cooperated for many years with the Suharto regime. For that matter, it is not clear that middle classes anywhere are uniformly pro-democratic. In Germany, for instance, the middle class never pressed the Kaiserreich for greater democratic representation.⁷⁸ In Latin America, business interests have frequently supported stable "bureaucratic authoritarian" regimes.⁷⁹ In China, the middle class emerging from the post-Mao economic reform program is largely apolitical and conservative.⁸⁰ The student demonstrators in Tiananmen Square in 1989 seem to have been more interested in addressing official cor-

76. As with many matters pertaining to the Thai royal family, the precise reasons for this are unclear. From his past actions, however, it is clear that the king values order in Thai society, and it is reasonable under the circumstances to suppose that he was concerned that appointing an unelected PM would lead to further disorder.

77. See Daniel Bell, David Brown, Kanishka Kayasuriya, and David Martin Jones, *Towards Illiberal Democracy in Pacific Asia* (N.Y.: St. Martin's Press, 1995).

78. David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History* (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1984).

79. Guillermo O'Donnell, *Modernization and Bureaucratic-Authoritarianism: Studies in South American Politics* (Berkeley: University of California, Institute of International Studies, 1973).

80. See Barry Sautman, "Sirens of the Strongman: Neo-Authoritarianism in Recent Chinese Political Theory," *China Quarterly* 129 (March 1992); David L. Wank, "Private Business, Bureaucracy, and Political Alliance in a Chinese City," *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 33 (January 1995); and Margaret Pearson, *China's New Business Elite: The Political Consequences of Economic Reform* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

ruption than in instituting multiparty democracy—not unlike the protestors in Bangkok in 1992.⁸¹

This paper argues that Thailand is similar to at least two other cases in which democratization is commonly attributed to modernization: Taiwan and South Korea. In both South Korea and Taiwan, the growth of a middle class through industrialization did little to stimulate democracy. Middle-class interests were tied to state-sponsored development programs, and although governments in both countries recognized that the middle class could potentially represent a threat to authoritarian rule, they developed mechanisms for effectively managing this social sector.⁸²

In both South Korea and Taiwan, democracy activists were able to use foreign or global audiences to transform the political arena to their own advantage. In South Korea, democracy activists were able to undermine U.S. support for the Chun Doo Hwan government through a long series of massive demonstrations; they also promised to disrupt the Seoul Olympics, focusing global attention on conflicts that had previously been ignored by the international community.⁸³ In Taiwan, democratization was initiated from the highest level of Nationalist Party leadership.⁸⁴ Support came primarily from elites who had been educated abroad.⁸⁵ The transformation was provoked, at least in part, by a series of foreign policy setbacks in the 1970s. In 1979 the U.S. established formal diplomatic ties with the People's Republic of China (PRC), downgrading its ties with Taiwan. The same year, Taiwan lost the U.N. seat designated for China. One reason for these setbacks was the perception in the U.S. that there was little to choose from between the communist dictatorship of the PRC and the right-wing dictatorship of Taiwan's Kuomintang (KMT, Nationalist Party). Reform-oriented members of the KMT argued for the need for reform in order to wage a publicity offensive abroad.

81. I am indebted to Laura Luehrmann on this point. Non-student demonstrators in Tiananmen Square, particularly labor activists, seem to have had a different agenda than the more middle class elements of the crowd.

82. David Brown and David Martin Jones, "Democratization and the Myth of the Liberalizing Middle Class," in Bell et al., *Towards Illiberal Democracy*.

83. Manwoo Lee, *The Odyssey of Korean Democracy* (New York: Praeger, 1990), pp. 322–23; Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun* (N.Y.: W.W. Norton, 1997), Chapter 7.

84. Andrew J. Nathan with Helena V.S. Ho, "The Decision for Reform in Taiwan," in Andrew J. Nathan, *China's Transition* (N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1997); Linda Chao and Ramon H. Myers, *The First Chinese Democracy: Political Life in the Republic of China on Taiwan* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

85. Tun-jen Cheng and Stephan Haggard, "Regime Transformation in Taiwan: Theoretical and Comparative Perspectives," in Cheng and Haggard, eds, *Political Change in Taiwan* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1992), p. 10.

Indeed, voters in both South Korea and Taiwan still seem ambivalent about democracy. Support for democratic institutions has declined in both countries.⁸⁶ Taiwanese voters responded weakly to opposition parties when they were legalized in 1987. The KMT continued to win large majorities in the Legislative Yuan and the National Assembly. The party lost the 2000 presidential election only because the KMT vote split, allowing the Democratic People's Party candidate to win with only 39% of the vote.

In neither case has the middle class been politically unified, or assumed a leading role. Furthermore, support for democracy has been spread among other groups, including labor and students, which have often been more active and consistent advocates of democracy. In both cases, international factors played a decisive role in shaping the political arena in ways that advantaged some actors and hurt others. In Taiwan and South Korea, where transitions occurred prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, U.S. influence was crucial. In the Thai case, it was economic globalization rather than diplomatic relations with a particular country that advantaged advocates of democracy, but the political dynamics with respect to the middle class were similar.

Conclusion: Implications for Thai Democracy

For the time being, Thai politics show greater promise for a continuation and consolidation of democracy than ever before. Such an enthusiastic interpretation should be tempered, however. While the new Constitution is the most democratic ever, constitutions are far from sacred in Thailand: the previous 15 have had an average lifespan of slightly less than four and a half years. Most of those changes of constitution were due to military intervention.⁸⁷

When the military began to intervene in favor of democratic politics, a watershed, hopefully, was passed. There now appears to be a widespread perception among Thai elites that structural changes in the economy—particularly the need for foreign-capital inflows—have made coups dangerous and counterproductive. This perception is likely to discourage any undemocratic revision of the new constitution, although democratic revisions are already

86. Yun-han Chu, Larry Diamond, and Doh Chull Shin, "Halting Progress in Korea and Taiwan," in *Journal of Democracy* 12, 1 (January 2001).

87. At the time of the 1991 coup, Thailand had as many coups as elections (17). Anek, *Mob Muethue*, p. 61. On the ironic contrast between the fragility of Thai constitutions and the robustness of Thai constitutionalism, see Duncan McCargo, "Alternative Meanings of Reform in Contemporary Thailand," in *The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies* 13:98 (1999), pp. 5–30.

being discussed. It is clear, however, that the Constitution will not be able to defend itself. It requires active support.⁸⁸

However, Thai political activists, like foreign scholars, have not generally recognized the significance of economic globalization for Thai democracy. Globalization is a hotly debated issue in Thailand today, primarily with respect to its implications for national sovereignty and the distribution of wealth. In that debate, many of the NGO activists who were promoters of democracy in the dark days of 1991–92 have staked out intellectual positions against globalization, equating it with the interests of the wealthy and powerful.⁸⁹

A nationalist backlash against globalization could undermine democracy in Thailand by undermining the conditions that currently favor its supporters. Just as the academics and intellectuals who so vociferously criticized the Chatichai government unwittingly paved the way for the NPKC coup, so critics of globalization could prepare the ground for a more autarkic economic order that would be more resistant to transnational pressures. If the above argument is correct, such autarky would neutralize what has so far been a pro-democratic force in Thailand. The lack of recognition among academics and activists of the strategic opportunities created by economic globalization makes this prospect all the more likely.

As the economy continues to languish and the recovery program encourages more foreign ownership of Thai companies, hostility to globalization has grown. One part of the three-part slogan of Chavalit's New Aspiration Party in the 2001 elections was "Free from Foreigners" (*thai cak tang chat*).⁹⁰ Thaksin Shinawatra's Thai Rak Thai party triumphed in those elections on a populist economic rhetoric that tapped anti-foreign sentiment.⁹¹ Thaksin's government has recently ventured into cultural politics in a small way. For instance, Pongpol Adireksarn, now minister of education, recently suggested

88. McCargo notes that "whereas a constitution for many other countries is something above the fray of day-to-day politics, . . . the Thai constitution is a political football to be kicked around by the winning team." "Alternative Meanings of Reform," p. 6.

89. See Craig J. Reynolds, "Globalization and Cultural Nationalism in Modern Thailand," in Joel Kahn, ed., *Southeast Asian Identities: Culture and the Politics of Representation in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand* (N.Y.: St. Martin's Press, 1998); and Natasha Hamilton-Hart, "Thailand and Globalization," in Samuel S. Kim, ed., *East Asia and Globalization* (N.Y.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000). For a sample of the debate in Thai, see *Mueang Boran* [Ancient city], "Cak 'Lokanuwat' Thueng 'Lokawibat' Nai Sangkhom Thai" [From globalization to global disaster in Thai society] 20, 1 (January-March 1994), pp. 6–12; and the transcript of a debate held at Thammasat University, published as "Lokanuwat, Lokantranuwat, Lokawiwat" [Globalization, hellification, and global Debate], *Warasan Thammasat* [Thammasat Journal] 20:1 (January-April 1994), pp. 101–24.

90. Personal communication from Robert Bickner, April 26, 2001.

91. *Bangkok Post*, "Thai Rak Thai Denies Its Policy Is Opposed to Foreign Interests; US Official Remains Worried," *Bangkok Post Online Edition*, January 18, 2001.

that foreigners should be barred from training in “Thai wisdom,” including Thai boxing and massage.⁹² The Thai senate recently rejected a banking bill because it included the words “small- and medium-size enterprises” in English.⁹³

Furthermore, the international conditions that favor democracy are themselves mutable. The preference of international investors for democracy in Thailand is premised on the assumption that democracy would ensure political stability. If this is not the case in the long run, investors may also come to favor conservative retrenchment, such as Prem-style “demi-democracy.” During the Cold War, international investors and the U.S. government cheerfully supported full-blown military regimes in Thailand and elsewhere because they represented stability. While investors clearly favor the transparency in economic policymaking that democracy brings, they have demonstrated that they are equally happy to invest in relatively undemocratic regimes that project an image of technocratic competence—for instance, Singapore’s.⁹⁴ The NPKC’s appointment of Anand as prime minister suggests that even the Thai military sees military regimes as unfeasible in Thailand. However, the enthusiasm for both unelected Anand governments, bracketing Suchinda’s as they did, also shows that unelected technocratic regimes might well receive domestic and international support.

One of the attractions of modernization theory is that it offers a simple, unidirectional theory of progress. Once the structural conditions for democracy are in place, they are extremely difficult to change: one would have to reverse economic growth, reduce literacy rates, interrupt mass communications, and destroy or neutralize the middle class, with its democratic aspirations.

Democracy in Thailand is more complicated and contingent than modernization theory would suggest. It depends on the interaction between global capital and domestic politics, factors that change constantly and provide a shifting political terrain. While it might be satisfying to end with a claim that Thailand has passed a tipping point and is now firmly democratic, in fact the future of democracy there rests on contingent circumstances and the vagaries of human agency.

92. Sirikul Bunnag, “Move to Bar Foreigners from Studying Thai Boxing, Massage,” *ibid.*, November 7, 2002.

93. *Bangkok Post*, “Business Support Bill: Senators Rebel Against Use of English Terms” (online edition), September 13, 2002.

94. Although opposition figures in Singapore claim that the government’s reputation for integrity and transparency is undeserved. See Chee Soon Juan, “Pressing for Openness in Singapore,” *Journal of Democracy* 12:2 (April 2001), pp. 158–60.