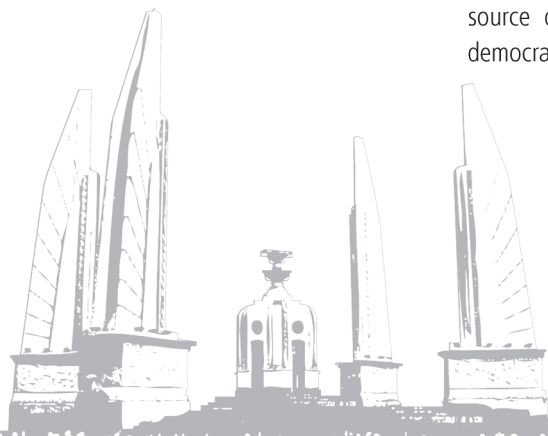


Building the Good Society in Thailand

Resolving transformation conflict through inclusive compromise

Marc Saxer
October 2014

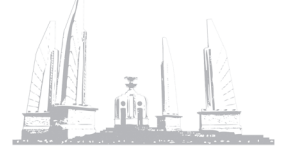
- To overcome the transformation crisis, Thailand's political, economic, social and cultural order needs to be adapted to cope with the complexity, diversity and permanent conflict of a pluralist society.
- Such innovation faces resistance by those who are invested in the status quo. Only a broad societal change coalition can build the political muscle needed to implement the necessary paradigm shifts. Only a political platform based on inclusive compromise enables social groups with diverging interests and worldviews to join forces to struggle together for a new social contract.
- Four inclusive compromises are needed to lay the foundations for the Good Society:
 - To lay the political foundation, reassurances in the form of constitutional safeguards are needed. Only a thick democracy can provide the governance infrastructure and political culture necessary to effectively meet the needs of a complex economy and pluralist society. Deepening democracy empowers people to fight the abuse of power enabling 'corruption' and to emancipate from the patronage system.
 - To lay the social foundation, a broad democratic coalition in the center is needed which can marginalize the extremes. The middle class in particular must be brought back into the democratic flock. This is why the new social contract needs to be based on an inclusive social compromise which caters to the interests of all classes.
 - To lay the economic foundation, Thailand has to escape the Middle Income Trap by switching to an inclusive and innovation-led development path. Socially just, resilient and green dynamic growth is needed to provide full capabilities for all.
 - To lay the normative foundation, the dominance of the moralist political discourse as a major source of reactionary power must be broken. The Good Society needs to be built upon democratic, pluralist, universalist, contractual and just norms and values.





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I. INTRODUCTION: Transformation conflicts around the world

"Nothing comes of itself, and only a few things last."

Willy Brandt

Over the past decades, societies around the world have made major progress on development. While some have succeeded to generate economic miracles, others faced bumpier roads. Either way, the integration into the capitalist global division of labor and the normative and social changes accompanying it, have transformed these societies. However, while societies are changing fundamentally, their political orders have not been adequately adapted to the new social realities. As a consequence, transformation societies are rocked by legitimacy crises of and social conflict.

Decade long transformation conflicts can come to a (violent) head, as could be witnessed by the eruptions in the Philippines (2000/01), Venezuela (2001/02), Taiwan (2004, 2006), Bangladesh (2006/07), Kenya (2007/08), Bolivia (2008), Kyrgyzstan (2005, 2010), Georgia (2003, 2007), Ukraine (2004, 2013/14), Tunisia (2011), Egypt (2011, 2013), Turkey (2013), Thailand (2006, 2008, 2013/14), Brazil (2014) and others. Despite their vastly different political, social and cultural contexts, some of these crises show remarkably similar patterns.

In the third wave of democratization, many societies set out to end arbitrary rule, sent military forces back to the barracks, and installed electoral democracies.¹ While some have made great progress in building democratic institutions and strengthening the rule of law, others started out late or got stuck in the "vertigo of change".^a Either way, all transformation societies are struggling with monumental challenges. Most importantly,

economic development did not lessen and sometimes even aggravated crises of social justice. Having escaped the alimentary imperative, millions of "political peasants"², "urbanized villagers"³, and emerging provincial middle classes now demand equal participation in social, economic, cultural and political life.

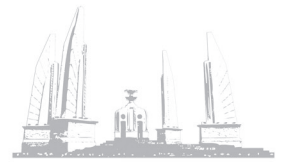
Clever political entrepreneurs realized that this crisis of social justice offers the opportunity to build new power bases beyond the patronage networks of traditional elites.⁴ By offering channels of economic development and social mobility to the provinces, they give emerging classes what they crave most: hope, dignity, social mobility and the opportunity to determine one's own life. By catering to the grievances and needs of the politically marginalized, they manage to turn millions into loyal supporters.

Once in power, these elected leaders quickly turn into 'elected autocrats'⁵. Following the winner-takes-it-all logic of the patronage system, they start out to reward supporters, protect clients, distribute spoils, favor kin, cut out non-supporters and crush their opponents. Uninterested in negotiation, compromise and tolerance of opposition, elected autocrats tend to brush aside checks and balances and undermine the rule of law. Not strong enough to restrain these "strong arm leaders", the fragile institutions of young democracies are often getting badly damaged.

From the perspective of the middle class in the capital, the abuse of power, the open disregard for the rule of law, the pummeling of opposition and violation of human rights are perceived as a threat.⁶ The patrimonial practices and incompetence of elected representatives from the provinces are furiously condemned as vulgar corruption, nepotism, and populism.

Not all of those policies, however, are "populist" in the sense of simply funneling money to please

^a Saxer, Marc. The Middle Classes in the Vertigo of Change, Social Europe Journal (2014).
<http://www.social-europe.eu/2014/08/vertigo-of-change/>



constituents. Some social and developmental policies do in fact reflect a paradigm shift away from paternalism towards empowerment. Often benefitting from public services for the very first time, the majority population votes their 'elected autocrat' back into office time and again.

Unable to beat the 'elected autocrat' at the voting booth, urban elites and middle classes grow increasingly desperate and angry. Remarkably, it is often the same veteran democracy activists that were fighting against authoritarian regimes early on who now turn to extra-constitutional means to topple the very liberal democracy they helped to found in the first place.⁷ Hundreds of thousands of middle class men and women come to march in the streets, sometimes clashing with the police, calling for interventions by the judiciary and the military.⁸

Despite military coups, judiciary interventions and rewritten constitutions, however, some 'elected autocrats' manage to come back with the help of the loyal majority. As long as the underlying crisis of social justice remains unsolved, the struggle over the political and social order continues.

Ian Bremmer famously described this pattern of transformation with a "J curve".⁹ According to this model, once a country starts opening up its political system, stability quickly decreases. Only after the major cleavage conflicts are resolved by social compromises, stability starts to gradually increase again. In other words, transformations are rough rides where things can get messy. The challenge for every transformation society is to get through this rough patch as quickly and safely as possible.

Of course, some may think that it is not necessary to open up the political system. Especially when things get messy, they seek to rush back to the safe shore of authoritarian rule. A quick coup d'état may indeed facilitate short-term stability. However, in the long run these rollbacks do not work. The structural changes driving transformations will

continue to cripple the political system and choke development until society decides to open up the political system again.

Readers in Thailand may find a certain comfort in the fact that the "red-yellow conflict" which has been crippling the country for almost a decade is not as unique as it is often asserted. In fact, most developed nations had to go through their own "vertigo years" before they managed to adapt their political order to the new social reality.¹⁰ However, there is no reason to be complacent. Without any settlement, transformation conflicts can rage on for decades. How such an eventual settlement looks like, however, is by no means clear. Political development does not follow any predetermined path¹¹, but is shaped by political struggles.¹² Depending on the outcome of these struggles, the resulting political order may be a consolidated democracy or an authoritarian system.

This paper sums up the findings of a series of analyses^b on the transformation conflict in Thailand. With a view of empowering those who are struggling for a truly democratic and socially just society, it will offer strategies to overcome the transformation crisis.

II. METHODOLOGY: The four dimensions of transformation

The conflict in Thailand has many dimensions and plays out on at least four intertwined levels. First, on the actors' level, it is a power struggle between two elite networks and their allies over the political and economic control of Thailand. Secondly, on the level of structural change, it reflects the rising complexity of an emerging capitalist economy and the diversity and permanent conflict of a pluralist mass society. Thirdly, on the level of social change,

^b In the interest of comprehensiveness, it will not be possible to fully develop all arguments here. For further reading, please also see the analyses indicated in the footnotes.

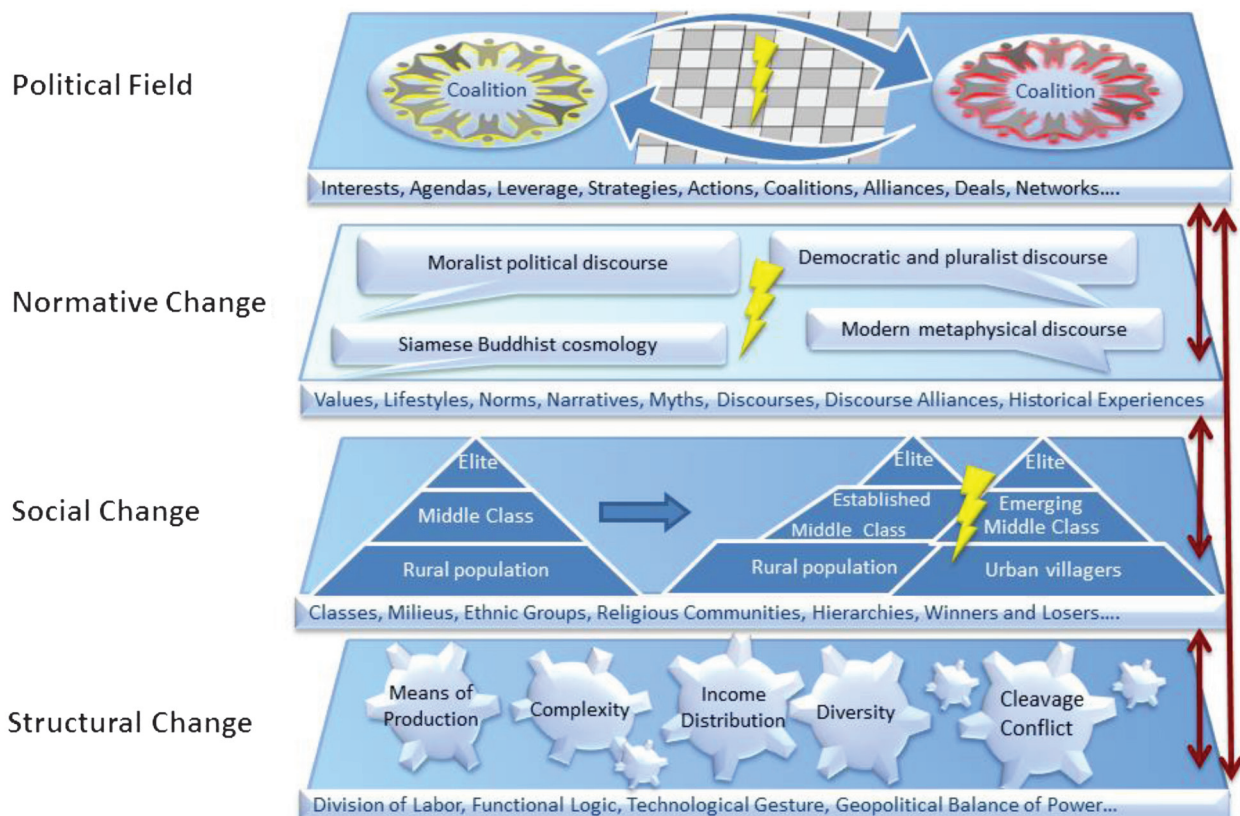


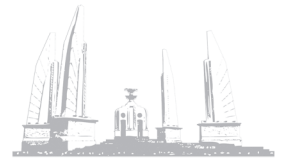
it reflects a struggle between those who seek to uphold the status quo and those who seek change. Finally, on the level of normative change, it is a clash between the moralist political discourse rooted in a Buddhist cosmology and a democratic political discourse rooted in modern metaphysics.

In order to build effective strategies for democratization, sound analyses of structures, actors, social groups and discourses are necessary, yet insufficient. What is needed is a holistic understanding of the interplay between these four levels, and how they are effectively working together in formatting the playing field for democratization struggles. For instance, socio-economic development is changing the fabric of society, thereby slowly shifting the opportunity structures for different groups of actors. Vice versa, the actions of individuals, alliances and institutions determine which path structural development follows. These actors, in turn, do not define their interests, set their goals and plot their course of

actions based on some objective assessment of reality, but based on subjective perceptions of “what is happening” and normative notions of “what should be done”. Here it is important to understand how social norms work as filters, determining “what can be said and done”. In turn, the act of speaking and the use of language are political acts which influence, shape and define social norms. In other words, a comprehensive analysis of the Thai conflict, let alone a viable strategy to overcome it, must not be limited to facts and figures, but needs to understand how actors interpret, talk about, and react to these facts and figures.

The following analysis aims to explore how Thailand’s transformation conflict plays out on these four levels. Again, this is not to suggest any kind of historical determinism. Rather, the four dimensions of transformation need to be understood as opportunity structures for the struggle over the new political and social order.





III. ANALYSIS: **Thailand's** transformation conflict

"The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear."

Antonio Gramsci

III 1 What is a transformation conflict?

What is a transformation crisis, and how to overcome it? A transformation crisis can occur when a society changes quickly without adapting its political system to the new social reality^c. In a way, transformation societies are suffering from their own success. Decades of economic growth have created modern economies, which are not only larger, but far more complex than agricultural economies. Providing the necessary infrastructure and public goods for such a complex economy requires a highly effective governance system. Traditional governance systems were built for a different time with different needs. They are hopelessly overstretched in catering to the needs of a complex economy. So the first structural change eroding the traditional order is the increased complexity.

A complex economy diversifies society.¹³ Agricultural economies offer relatively limited professional choices. In a complex industrial economy, thousands of new professions emerge. Different lifestyles create different worldviews, different identities and different values. Therefore, in a pluralist society, the noise of debate is not the exception, but the norm. Traditional political cultures, which revolve around notions of unanimity and harmony, perceive as debate as divisive and the "lack of unity" as decay.¹⁴ So, the second

structural change overstressing the traditional order is diversity.

Economic and social development creates winners and losers. New middle classes emerge in the provinces and demand equal participation in political and social life. The established middle class in the capital may see these demands as a threat. Along with the traditional elites, they are not prepared to accept these citizens as equals.¹⁵ The result is a long-drawn-out social conflict over the political order. Beyond this social conflict between top and bottom of society, conflicts emerge between center and periphery. In this cleavage, people struggle over the distribution of authority and resources between the federal government and local administrations, as well as opportunities and wealth between inhabitants of Bangkok and the provinces.¹⁶ Finally, a cleavage conflict emerges over rivaling claims to The One and Only Truth. In the politics of truth, groups who claim to promote The Truth perceive themselves as being righteous, while those who dissent are not only considered to be wrong but immoral. By shifting the balance of power, socio-economic development tends to aggravate all three cleavage conflicts. Hence, the third structural change overstressing the traditional order is permanent conflict.

The structural changes "complexity, diversity and conflict" work together to erode the old vertical society and create a more horizontal society. Economic, cultural and social changes are overstressing the traditional political system.¹⁷

In essence, transformation conflicts are legitimacy crises of the political, social and economic order. While traditional concepts of legitimacy (e.g. merit, charisma, divinity) are being contested, modern forms such as electoral majority rule are not yet universally accepted.¹⁸ At the same time, economic, political and social distortions typical for transformation periods squeeze output legitimacy.

^c Saxer, Marc. In *The Vertigo of Change: How to Resolve the Political Crisis?*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bangkok/ Berlin (2011). <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/thailand/08259.pdf>



In order to be politically stable, however, any political system needs to continuously create input and output legitimacy. This is why in order to overcome the legitimacy crisis, the political order needs to undergo fundamental reforms

Politically speaking, the structural changes of complexity, diversity and conflict are game changers: the top down, exclusive decision-making mechanisms of the old order no longer work in a horizontal society. This means urgent practical problems cannot be tackled with the old tools: How to satisfy the growing demands for public goods if the middle class does not accept to be taxed? How to deal with demands for greater participation if traditional elites do not accept all citizens as equals? How to process the vast amounts of information needed to stir a complex economy when only a few people have the authority to make decisions?

In order to tackle these and many more challenges, the political “operating system” needs to be upgraded. In Asia, two modern regime types compete in tackling the many political, social and economic challenges of transformation. The authoritarian state-led capitalist model generates input legitimacy with merit-based selection of decision-makers and output legitimacy by increasing wealth for all citizens. Depending on high economic performance, these regimes are highly vulnerable to shocks. More so, extractive economies combined with abusive states generate discontent from the excluded and mistreated. Democratic capitalism, on the other hand, enjoys electoral input legitimacy, but equally faces instability if it does not “deliver” on the output side. Both regime types face rising expectations for good governance, better living conditions and greater participation.

To satisfy the needs and demands of a complex economy and pluralistic society, a capable

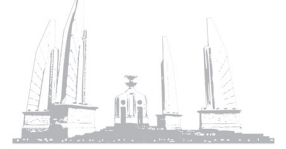
governance system is needed. In order to process the vastly increasing amount of information needed to stir a complex economy, more stakeholders have to be included into the policy-making process. A basic mechanism is needed to determine who is eligible to take decisions. Checks and balances against the abuse of power, be it by an oligarchy or an electoral majority, must be installed. Only effective institutions are able to enforce the rules of the game. The track record of developed nations seems to suggest that democracy has better power-sharing, mediation and supervision mechanisms to tackle all these challenges. Which system prevails will to some extent depend on its ability to produce political stability and steady economic growth amidst the vertigo of change. More likely, however, the resulting regime type will be the outcome of the all-out transformation conflict over the political and social order.

III 2 Obstacles to transformation conflict resolution

In order to overcome the transformation crisis, Thailand needs to adapt its political system to the needs of a complex economy and pluralist society. In other words, Thai society needs to re-negotiate the social contract. Ideally, the re-negotiation of the social contract should be conducted in an inclusive, deliberative and participatory way. In reality, however, many obstacles have so far prevented this from happening. Various political, social, ideological and organizational challenges need to be tackled to overcome the transformation conflict.^d Most importantly, at the very core of the transformation conflict lays a political struggle over the political

^d Saxer, Marc. How can Thailand overcome its transformation crisis?: A Strategy for Democratic Change, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bangkok/ Berlin (2012).

<http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/thailand/09496-20121217.pdf>



order. It is an all-out political conflict between those who seek to conserve the status quo and those who want change. In this struggle, traditional ideas continue to provide discursive power to the status quo coalition. Both the political economy as well as the patronage system behind the institutional facades are set to reproduce the status quo. On the other side, the constructed red yellow divide prevents the formation of a broad societal coalition for democratic change. In order to get a realistic assessment of the opportunity structures for democratic change, it is particularly helpful to look deeper into the root causes for middle class rage and fear.

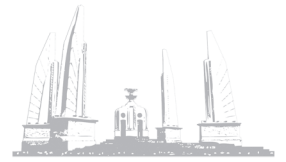
The struggle between those who seek to uphold the status quo and those who want change

In some countries, consolidated democracies were built by enlightened elites who have understood that it is in their best interest to settle social conflict with a social compromise. In Thailand, unfortunately, many in the elite seem to be lacking such enlightened foresight. On the very contrary, some seek to defy the gravity of socio-economic change and turn back the wheel of history. However, as the seven month long struggle to overthrow the elected government has shown, the balance of power has already significantly shifted away from traditional elites. Most importantly, traditional elites have lost their ability to explain “what is happening” and “what should be done.” Lacking democratic legitimacy, traditional elites can maintain their grip on power only by coercion. Ironically, this exhaustion of legitimacy is highlighted by desperate attempts to revitalize the old order with “patriotic education”, “attitude adjustments”, the abuse of the draconian *lèse majesté* law, and an absurd “happiness” campaign. Such ideological overdrive is a sign of agony of any regime.

Others do understand that Thailand needs to change, but fear that “democracy is not good for Thai society”. Reactionary reformers are pushing for an ambitious agenda of reforms, ranging from education reform to “stamping out corruption” and “ending populism”. However, as recent attempts to restore the old bureaucratic polity run by the ‘network monarchy’¹⁹ suggest, Thailand’s reactionary reformers seem to hang on to the delusion that economic growth can be revitalized with the old recipes, namely without touching the traditional order. However, the failure to modernize the political and social order can only result in a resurgence of the patronage system with its inherent corruption and incompetence.

Those who seek to overhaul the political and social order are split into two camps. One group aims to modernize the Thai state in order to boost the competitiveness of the economy. These reformers are sometimes labeled as ‘neoliberals’, but this may be misleading. More accurately, they look for inspiration towards Singapore. Singapore’s authoritarian state-guided capitalist model claims that for high economic performance, governance efficiency is needed, but not the consent and participation of citizens. This lack of input legitimacy, however, typically leads to political instability in times of leadership succession. Additionally, while authoritarian capitalist systems have been highly successful in generating extractive growth, they have yet to prove that they are able to produce the constant political and economic innovation needed to compete in the global economy of the information age.

The reformist wing of civil society aims to build a genuine democracy as an end in itself. Reflecting the silo structure of Thai society, and split along the red-yellow divide, this fragmented group includes academics, non-governmental organizations, as well as grassroots and student activists. Their priorities range from civic rights to social justice



and the protection of the environment. A myriad of single issue watchdogs struggles against a broad spectrum of abuses (migrant workers, whistle blowers, land grabbing, human trafficking etc.) and social ills (sexual diseases, prostitution, environmental degradation etc.). Despite Thailand's restrictive political culture, their willingness to "speak truth to power" has dramatically increased over the past years. Both online and offline, younger activists have developed innovative forms of communication and protest. However, many civil society activists seem to be unaware of the fundamental nature of politics as struggle. Hopes are usually pinned on "raising awareness" and "creating understanding", while reform efforts often follow the technocratic approach of "institutional engineering" or "global institution shopping". There is a widespread belief that "policy is made by politicians", while the role of civil society is to sit at the sideline in order to monitor and criticize. Too little effort is made to drive the political process with comprehensive strategies and campaigns.

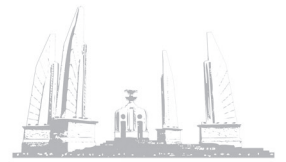
The majority population managed to raise its political clout over the past decade. A number of important lessons have changed the political outlook of the people in the provinces. First, responsive state policies can drive development. Second, the collective will of hundreds of thousands in the streets and millions at the ballot boxes cannot be ignored. Third, for the electoral majority, enlisting the state as a tool of empowerment is a promising strategy. Fourth, dependence on a patron carries the risk of being sold out. Fifth, those who seek democratic change need to build up their own political muscle by organizing, educating and mobilizing. With the increasing hopes and demands of emerging middle classes, and the rising awareness of political villagers of their clout, the spirit of democracy is out of the bottle. Continuing socio-economic

change will accelerate the overall shift in the balance of power. On the other hand, recent events have shown the limitations of the strategy to push through change by majority rule. Tactical questions of political alliances aside, unrestricted majority rule always creates fear and resistance, and may trigger an authoritarian backlash by embattled elites and established middle classes.

So why is Bangkok's established middle class marching against electoral democracy? ^e This was not always the case. In the 1990s, the middle class was struggling to build a liberal democracy. Elite backroom maneuvering to prevent a truly people-oriented democratic regime notwithstanding, the "People Constitution" of 1997 established the most liberal political regime in Thailand's history.²⁰

After establishing electoral democracy, however, the middle class soon found itself in a permanent minority position. The triumphant alliance between capitalist tycoons and the provinces stressed majority rule, disregarded the rule of law and undermined checks and balances.²¹ The oppression of the opposition, free media and civil society threatened the middle class. The new rulers brought their patronage logic from the provinces with them into the capital. The middle class fears to be "robbed by corrupt politicians who take our money to buy votes from the greedy poor with populist projects". With their establishment party vehicle unable to win elections, Bangkok's desperate middle class turned to traditional elites and their military allies to overturn elected governments by extra-constitutional means.

^e Saxer, Marc. Middle class rage threatens democracy, New Mandala (2014)
<http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2014/01/21/middle-class-rage-threatens-democracy/>



The struggle between moralist and democratic discourse communities

While the Thai transformation conflict has many similarities with transformation crises in different cultural contexts, Thailand is indeed unique in some respects. Most profoundly, since the fall of Ayutthaya, Thailand has not suffered from any rupture. From the Holocaust to Hiroshima, from colonization to independence struggles, from world wars to civil wars, most societies have suffered through catastrophes after which nothing could be the same as before. On the ontological level, the 'Hour Zero' marks the collapse of the old cosmology, and the birth of a new order. The fact that Thailand never experienced such a rupture helps to explain why the traditional cosmology still carries such strong clout. The political discourse rooted in the Buddhist cosmology is a considerable source of ideological power supporting and maintaining the status quo. In its latest reincarnation, this moralist discourse is the metaphysical narrative in which most conservative paradigms are rooted.

The moralist political discourse is rooted in the Siamese interpretation of the Theravada Buddhist concept of the good ruler²². Ruling power is legitimated by the claim of the ruler to embody merit and charisma. This is why until today, political claims are framed in terms of morality. The good order in the moralist discourse is not political in terms of competing ideas or projects, but a static social order in which "good people" are in charge. In such an order, the role of the vast majority of people is to be self-sufficient, e.g. to accept their place and role in the social hierarchy.

This static cosmology is being challenged by the life experience of millions of Thais who have profited from economic development. Based on this experience of social mobility, a new discourse

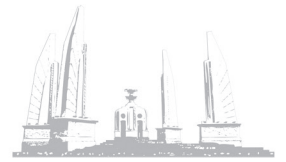
community embraces ideas of self-determination and universal rights, and demands equal participation in political and social life.

This shows that a transformation crisis is more than a power struggle. It is a rivalry between worldviews, a clash between moral codes, a competition over what is The Truth. A transformation conflict shakes the normative foundations of society, questions identities and disrupts traditions. It is a polarized, emotional, and sometimes explosive conflict over the fundamental question how people want to live together in a society.

The struggle between winners and losers of the emerging political economy

Meanwhile, the world around Thailand does not stop. A multitude of economic, environmental and social challenges undermines the extractive growth model which propelled Thailand's emergence from an agricultural backwater into an upper middle income economy deeply integrated into the global division of labor.²³ Unfortunately, at the very time when Thai society needs to tackle the herculean task of rebuilding its political and social order, the economic engine is running out of steam.

Extractive growth models tend to hit a glass ceiling. In an extractive political economy, the few extract resources from the many.²⁴ Benefitting from the status quo, these oligarchic elites have little incentive to embrace change. However, without constant innovation, an economy cannot enter the next stage of development, and remains stuck at the bottom of the global value chain. In other words, the development path needs to be shifted away from the extraction of cheap labor and natural resources, and towards innovation and productivity led growth. What is needed is a new development model which allows escaping the Middle Income Trap.



Such fundamental policy shifts will be resisted by those who benefit from the current political economy. The necessary change of course can only be brought about by a broad change coalition.

The struggle between the feudalist patronage system and the legalistic rational state

Beyond a certain threshold, endemic corruption and nepotism can seriously hamper political and economic development.²⁵ So the popular instinct that “corruption is Thailand's biggest problem” is not entirely wrong. The flawed equation of corruption with democracy, on the other hand, can become an obstacle to political development. The claim that electoral democracy drives corruption is empirically and conceptually wrong.²⁶ Based on this flawed equation, however, the fight against corruption can easily be abused by traditional elites to protect their status and privilege. This is why patron-client relationships are framed as the ‘Thai way’, the patronage system as ‘Thai democracy’²⁷ and patrimonial culture as ‘Thainess’.²⁸

To make the fight against corruption more effective, it is necessary to strip it from all ideological baggage. In its very essence, corruption is the abuse of power. However, corruption is more than the moral failure of individuals. Corruption, nepotism and cronyism are the very working mechanisms of the patronage system operating behind the institutional facades. A patron operates his network by rewarding allies, protecting clients, favoring kin, distributing spoils, cutting out non-supporters and crushing opponents. In a modern understanding, these practices are considered corruption, clientelism and cronyism.

In Thailand, both in phases of civilian and military rule, the structures, culture and practices of the patronage system form the backbone of the social order. As long as patrons can abuse their power to

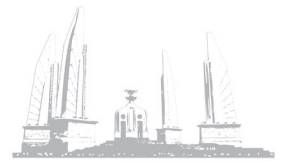
run their networks, corruption and nepotism will continue to be endemic. The only way to overcome the patronage system as the heir of feudalism is to build a modern state based on impersonal, legalistic-rational institutions.²⁹ This means the only way to effectively curb corruption is to modernize the political and social order.

The constructed divide between red and yellow discourse alliances

Over the last decade, one yellow movement after the other marched against corruption and the abuse of power. Ironically, by replacing electoral democracy with a bureaucratic ‘Thai democracy’, protesters helped to revitalize the very patronage system which produces the corruption they wanted to stamp out. Where does this disconnect between the social phenomenon of corruption, and the way people think and talk about it, come from?

This indicates that corruption discourses are good entry points to deconstruct the red yellow divide. What brings together royalists and former communists, business people and workers, armed forces and civil society on the yellow side, and neoliberal tycoons, the poor, progressive academics, security agencies and local godfathers on the red? In part, these odd alliances are brought together by patrons pursuing their vested interests. However, tactical considerations cannot fully explain the extraordinary resilience of these formations. Responding to contingent opportunity structures, coalitions of interests tend to be fragile and fleeting. This is why it is necessary to take a deeper look how the red yellow divide was constructed by competing discourse alliances. .

From a conservative point of view, there is nothing wrong with the order its adherents seek to conserve. Problems, then, must be caused by flawed individuals. Accordingly, the yellow



discourse explains corruption as the moral failure of individuals.³⁰ The moralist political discourse is rooted in Theravada Buddhist cosmology which legitimizes rule by the morality incorporated in the ruler. In the Buddhist cosmology, a lack of morality in the ruler will bring suffering into the world. Hence the moralist narrative explains the transformation crisis as one of “moral corruption which will lead to social decay”. By explaining “what is happening”, the moralist discourse gives a powerful imperative to “what needs to be done”: only by restoring morality, the just social order can be saved.

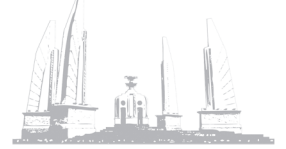
If legitimacy equates morality, then allegations of corruption as code for a lack of morality is the ideal weapon to bring down a government. As morality is a quality within people, restoring morality then means to replace immoral “bad people” with “good people” of high moral virtue. This explains the absence of any elaborated reform proposal by the protesters. By replacing “bad people” with “good” people, morality will be restored and all social ills will disappear. This also explains why a

movement which allegedly struggled to “save democracy” had so little regard for elections. If morality can only be restored by “exchanging bad people with good people”, elections which would most likely result in the confirmation of the government would only reaffirm an immoral state of affairs. Hence, the yellow battle-cry which brought together a heterogeneous protest mob of hundreds of thousands was “Reform before Elections!”

Some protesters went even further and called for the abolishment of electoral democracy altogether. This yellow fundamentalism is rooted in the Siamese interpretation of the ideal Buddhist polity in which the social hierarchy is supposed to reflect the karmic morality of individuals. In this cosmology, a social order which allows immoral people at the top must be seriously distorted. The logical short circuit is then to abandon the mechanism which seems to bring “bad people” to the top: elections.

At the margins of the yellow discourse alliance, fascist elements called for the “extermination of

	Yellow Discourse Alliance	Red Discourse Alliance
Battle Cry (Policy Discourse)	<i>Reform before Elections!</i>	<i>Elections before Reform!</i>
How to solve the problem? (Paradigm Discourse)	<i>Corruption caused by individual moral failure. ⇒ Replace Bad People with Good People.</i>	<i>Corruption is a symptom of a failing system. ⇒ Replace the system</i>
What is happening and what needs to be done? (Narrative Discourse)	<i>Moral corruption causes social decay. ⇒ Restore morality to save the old order</i>	<i>Social decay causes moral corruption. ⇒ Overcome the unjust system, build democracy</i>
Cosmology (Metaphysical Discourse)	<i>Theravada Buddhist: Rule is legitimized by morality</i>	<i>Modern: Rule is legitimized by consent</i>



the human garbage which causes Thailand's problems". Fascism is a typical reaction to the vertigo of change. Unable to explain the disruptions caused by social change, fascists blame problems on scapegoats. Fascists aim to undo the imagined social decay by strengthening exclusive collective identities. Building on the ethno-religious concept of 'Thainess', dissenters are labeled "un-Thai" and told to go live somewhere else.

After the coup, the military junta tapped into the moralist political discourse to legitimize its rule. By cracking down on vice and crime, the junta claimed to bring back happiness by restoring morality. Patriotic (re-) education, attitude adjustments and the crackdown on academic freedom are justified by concerns that "debate may cause social divisions". The attempt to enforce "reconciliation" by imposing artificial unity belies claims of political neutrality and makes the junta part of the yellow discourse alliance.

The red discourse alliance is more heterogeneous. Short of postmodern acceptance of the relativity of truth claims, the red academic community promotes modern norms such as human rights and electoral majority rule as universal truths. Those who promote traditional ideas are consequentially accused of being "on the wrong side of history". Accordingly, the red narrative explains moral injustices such as "double standards" as symptoms of 'ancien régime' decay. Where the yellow discourse assumes that "moral corruption causes social decay", the red discourse claims that "social decay causes moral corruption". The red paradigm discourse claims that corruption cannot be curbed inside the old political and social order, because it is merely a symptom of the failing system. The solution is then to build a truly democratic regime legitimized by the consent of the ruled. Fearful that yellow demands for reform are only a disguise for an attempt to do away with electoral democracy,

the red battle-cry could have been "Elections before Reform!"

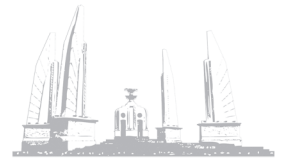
The rural red discourse community is still rooted in pre-modern notions of authority and universal truths. The rural "amaart conspiracy" discourse hopes that social ills such as corruption will be resolved once "feudalism" is overcome by true democracy. Emancipatory demands, however, are mixed with hopes for a strong and benign leader. This may explain a certain nonchalance of the rural red discourse community towards the corruption of its own leaders.

Similar "hopes for salvation" can be seen in the neoliberal discourse community.^f By trimming back the incompetent and corrupt state, neoliberals hope the market will unleash the full potential of the Thai economy.

So while the yellow discourse alliance seems firmly rooted in a pre-modern Buddhist cosmology, the red discourse alliance is more complex. Nonetheless, the red discourse alliance shares a platform in the common narrative that the old order is decaying and needs to be replaced with a truly democratic system.

In the absence of elections and trustworthy opinion poll, discourse analysis can also be helpful to assess the political field today. In the direct aftermath of the military coup on May 22, 2014, three discourse communities ("Red Threat", "Red Corruption" and "Neutral Mediator") supported the coup, while two communities ("Amaart Conspiracy" and "Democratic Rollback") are

^f Saxer, Marc. A democratic anti-corruption discourse for Thailand. New Mandala (2014). <http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2014/05/17/a-democratic-anti-corruption-discourse-for-thailand/>



opposing the military junta.⁹ Until today, these discourse communities are largely positioned along the red yellow divide. In most cases, speakers direct their support or criticism at the “already convinced” within the respective discourse community. However, internal contradictions in the pro-coup discourse alliance could make it difficult for the regime to hold its support base together. While fears of an imminent violent confrontation are subsiding, critical questions are being asked about how the regime is going to use its position of “absolute power”. Success or failure of the proposed reform package may sway some people to switch camps. Rooted in deep metaphysical beliefs, however, the red and yellow divide proves to be remarkably resilient. Again, this shows the importance of ideas and narratives as a source of discursive power. In the continued absence of violence, the fate of the junta may well be decided on the discursive field.

Again, it cannot be stressed enough that the red-yellow divide is constructed. As long as the red yellow divide continues to cripple the ability of society to organize itself, elites will be able to manipulate it for their own interests. In order to overcome the red yellow divide, Thai society needs to learn to communicate “across the aisle” with the aim of building a common narrative.

In sum, Thailand is experiencing the growing pains of its own success. Thirty years of economic growth have created a complex capitalist economy. Thai society today is more than ever pluralistic in lifestyles, values, identities and interests. The structural drivers complexity, diversity and permanent conflict are eroding the traditional normative foundations and work together to overstretch the governance system. Despite all

efforts to uphold the status quo, the old social and political order will inevitably crumble. A new political order, however, does not emerge automatically, but needs to be hard-won by non-violent struggle. As long as the political order is not adapted to satisfy the needs of a complex economy and pluralist society, the transformation conflict will continue. In order to overcome its transformation crisis, Thai society needs to agree on a new social contract.

IV. STRATEGY: Building the Good Society

“Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.”

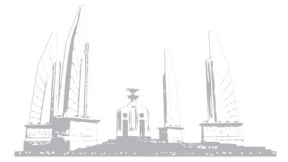
Martin Luther King

IV 1 Struggle and Compromise: A dialectical strategy for democratic change

How this social contract and the resulting political order will look like, however, depends on the outcome of the transformation struggle between those who seek to uphold the status quo, and those who seek change.³¹ Given the extensive coercive, financial, ideological and social resources at the disposal of the powers-that-be, the question of how to create political muscle for change becomes crucial.

In order to win this struggle over the future political order, two strategic approaches seem promising. First, those who seek democratic change need to join forces in a broad societal coalition. Second, to change the way people perceive “what is happening and what needs to be done?”; in other words, make use of the discourse as a source of power. Both strategic approaches are interdependent, meaning one cannot be achieved without the other. In order to overcome different

⁹ Saxer, Marc. Siamese dreams in the time of the junta, New Mandala (2014).
<http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2014/07/03/siamese-dreams-in-the-time-of-the-junta/>

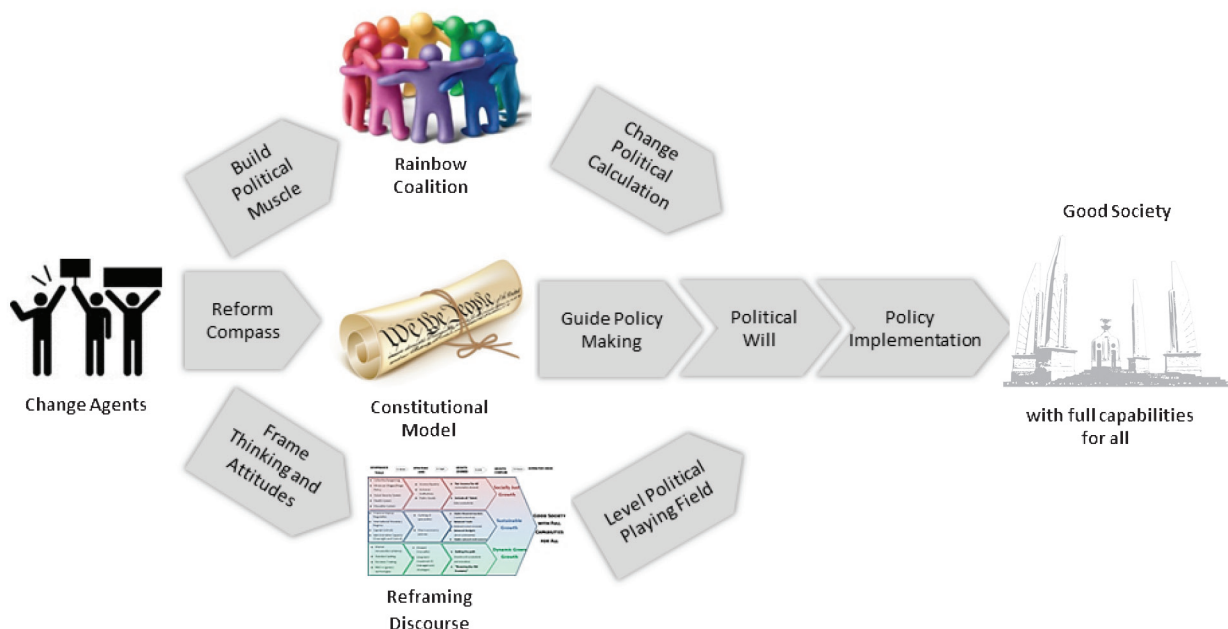


interests and diverging goals, social actors need to have a common discursive platform on which they come together. Vice versa, discourse hegemony can only be achieved by a broad discourse alliance. In order to break the resistance of the status quo alliance, all social groups seeking democratic change need to join forces in a Grand Rainbow Coalition.

The objective of this change coalition, however, is not to defeat the other side, but to unite as many stakeholders as possible in the democratic center. In other words: building a common polity is not a

recognition between top and bottom of society. Such comprehensive settlements can only be achieved by inclusive compromises between all members of society.

The ideal outcome of the transformation conflict is a social contract based on an inclusive compromise between all classes. Transformation processes are, however, dialectical in nature. This means the best strategy to eventually resolve the conflict through inclusive compromise is for change agents to build up political muscle and engage in the struggle in the first place.

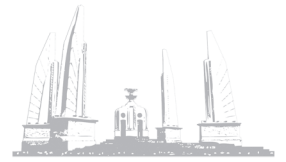


zero-sum game, so the winner must not take it all. On the very contrary, the goal is to conclude an inclusive social contract which, seen through the lens of enlightened self-interest, provides a win-win solution for all sides.

Such win-win solutions cannot be achieved by exclusive compromise between the elites only. The social contract needs to settle the basic cleavage conflicts of society. Inclusive compromises need to be found how to deal with competing claims to The One Truth, find a more even balance of power between center and periphery, and seek a fairer distribution of wealth, opportunities and

Democracy needs a social foundation in the center

As the cycle of conflict over the last nine years has shown, even an electoral majority was not enough to decide the transformation conflict. Hence, a better strategy is needed to bring about lasting and stable democracy. Rather than seeking quick policy gains by a narrow majority, the focus should be on building a broader and more stable foundation for democracy.



Currently, the center of the political field is deserted, and polarized extremists dominate the political debate and take the political process hostage. The red yellow divide enables the elites to pursue their self-interests by abusing their power. Without a strong democratic center asserting political rights and insisting on democratic procedures, democratic institutions are not much more than facades for the patronage system behind the scenes.

A broad societal coalition in the democratic center is needed to set and enforce the rules with a view of curbing the abuse of power by elites. In the long run, a democratic order based on a solid social foundation empowers citizens to emancipate from the patronage system. By marginalizing the extremes, the democratic center facilitates political stability. A broad societal coalition in the center can bridge the red-yellow divide by bringing together all those who seek to live in a democracy. The constructed red and yellow divide should not be resolved on the smallest common denominator, but replaced by a new dichotomy between democracy and dictatorship. Those on both sides of the aisle who seek democracy need to transcend the red-yellow divide with a common vision for a better future.

A practical utopia to mobilize the masses

In order to mobilize the masses, a vision is needed to inspire people to join this struggle. Ironically, at the beginning of the “Golden Asian Century”, those who are bound to benefit the most from the rise of China, India and Southeast Asia are crippled by fear. A vision for Thailand needs to embrace the opportunities of its “Golden Moment”. This vision needs to shift the focus from the fears and divisions of the past towards the opportunities of the future.

A practical utopia of a better tomorrow insists that a different world is not only possible, but within reach^h. A practical utopia does not promise paradise without worries, but lays out a concrete vision how society can be better in ten years (e.g. ‘Thailand 2025’). A practical utopia allows social groups to look beyond their divergent interests and join forces to struggle together for a better future. A practical utopia can unlock the paralysis of fear and mobilize a broad change coalition to build the ‘Good Society with full capabilities for all’.

IV 2 Laying the foundations for the Good Society

This practical utopia where the basic cleavage conflicts have been settled by an inclusive social contract shall be called the Good Society. To open the way towards such an inclusive social contract, four strategic compromises need to be struck between all members of society.

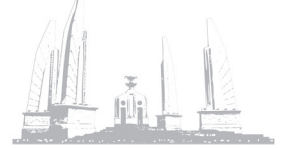
Four strategic compromises

To lay the foundation for the Good Society, four inclusive compromises³² need to be struck:

To lay the political foundation, reassurances in the form of constitutional safeguards are needed. Only a thick democracy can provide the governance infrastructure and political culture necessary to effectively meet the needs of a complex economy and pluralist society.

To lay the social foundation, a broad democratic coalition in the center which can marginalize the extremes is needed. The middle class in particular must be brought back into the democratic flock. This is why the new social contract needs to be

^h Saxer, Marc. Utopia, Technocracy and Struggle: Ways Out Of The Crisis Of Social Democracy, Social Europe Journal (2013). <http://www.social-europe.eu/2013/11/utopia-technocracy-and-struggle-ways-out-of-the-crisis-of-social-democracy/>



based on an inclusive social compromise which caters to the interests of all classes.

To lay the economic foundation, Thailand has to escape the Middle Income Trap by switching to an inclusive and innovation-led development path.³³ Socially just, resilient and green dynamic growth is needed to provide full capabilities for all.

To lay the normative foundation, the dominance of the moralist political discourse as a major source of reactionary power must be broken. The Good Society needs to be built upon democratic, pluralist, universalist, contractual and just norms and values.

Laying the social foundation: Inclusive social compromise between all classes

Democratization processes need to be driven by pressure from below. The consolidation of a stable democratic regime, however, depends upon the ability to integrate the middle classes and enlightened elites into the new social contract. Accordingly, the outcome of the transformation conflict in Thailand will to a great extent depend on the middle classes. If the established middle class in Bangkok continues to support the traditional elites, the status quo can be upheld. If the Bangkokian middle class chooses to side with the emerging middle classes, the shift in the balance of power will open the way for change. Strategically, this means the established middle class raging against electoral democracy needs to be brought back into the democratic flock.

This is why an inclusive social compromise is needed which caters both to the aspirations of emerging classes and reassures established classes who feel threatened by social change. In other words, the social contract must not be dominated by the interests of one class, but needs to be based on an inclusive social compromise between all classes.

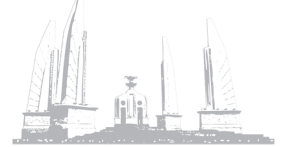
An inclusive social compromise needs to cater to the hopes of the majority population to have equal opportunities to fully participate in political, social and cultural life. The inclusive social compromise must equally strive towards the middle class ideal of a meritocratic system that honors personal achievements, provides opportunities for talent and rewards effort. Finally, a social compromise must reach out to enlightened elites who understand that it is in their long-term interest to restore social peace.³⁴

An inclusive social compromise is a give and take by all sides. Enlightened elites who have understood that change is inevitable must accept democracy as the only game in town. In return, the democratic order with rule of law and checks and balances offers safeguards for the interests of the elite minority. By embracing responsive electoral platforms which reach out to the majority of citizens, elites can re-enter the electoral game with a fair chance of winning a governing mandate.

The majority needs to accept checks and balances to majority rule in exchange for equal life chances for all. This is why paternalistic hand-outs are not enough. The social compromise needs to resolve the underlying crisis of social justice, which drives the social conflict. The new political and economic regime needs to produce equal opportunities for all citizens to participate in political, economic, social and cultural life. State, market and civil society need to provide 'full capabilities'ⁱ for all, empowering every member of society to live up to his or her full potential.

The middle classes need to payroll 'full capabilities for all' in return for social peace, protection by the rule of law, good governance and quality public

ⁱ Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum name at least ten capability clusters which empower individuals to live a Good Life: Bodily Health; Bodily Integrity; Senses, Imagination and Thought; Emotions; Practical Reason; Affiliation; Other Species; Play; Control over One's Environment.



goods. The “capabilities” approach is fundamentally in line with middle class values, namely a social hierarchy based on personal achievement rather than hereditary descent.

This “New Deal” combines the middle class ideal of meritocracy with the yearning of the majority population for equal opportunities. The provision of ‘full capabilities’ opens the door for a social compromise between the elites, the middle classes and the majority population. By reassuring those who fear social decline or the loss of identity, it allows to cater to the hopes and aspirations of those who seek a better life.

Laying the political foundation: Deepen democracy

After eighteen constitutions and countless legal reform committees, it becomes clear that a transformation crisis cannot be resolved by institutional engineering alone. A social contract also cannot be concluded by ill-conceived attempts to pamper over social cleavages by “pseudo reconciliation” which simply aims to “reunite” society under the status quo ante.

In a contractual culture, the imposition of a political order cannot work. Rules are nothing but a piece of paper until all sides agree to live by these rules. If rules are imposed by one side over the other, they will be resisted. This is why not only the content of the social contract matters, but also the process how it was agreed upon. It is of utmost importance that the reform process includes all stakeholders from all sides.

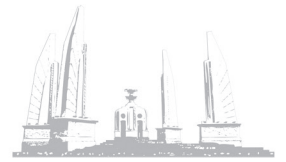
What is needed is a consensus between rivaling groups on a new formula how to live together. The lowest common denominator between all social groups is to build the democratic arena in which they will later compete. Fair rules and effective institutions are necessary yet insufficient to resolve the transformation crisis.

Deeper democratization is needed to curb endemic corruption and allow society to emancipate from the patronage system. Contrary to the false equation of corruption with democracy, corruption should be read as a problem of social justice between those who can abuse their power for private and political gain and those who fall victim to this extraction. Therefore, in order to fight corruption, the powerless need to be empowered to stand up to the powerful. To empower citizens means providing them with full capabilities to take their lives into their own hands. Empowered citizens are less dependent on protection and handouts and can emancipate from local and national patrons.

The social functions provided by the patronage system – the aggregation of social interests, the negotiation of compromises, the distribution of resources – need to be replaced by legalistic-rational institutions. This means citizens need mechanisms to organize the policy-making process. Effective democratic institutions are needed to check and balance the powerful. The effective rule of law provides security, settles disputes and protects citizens from the abuse of power. A merit based administrative and educational system rewards personal achievement instead of personal connections. Free media and an active civil society act as watchdogs and whistleblowers. All things considered, what is needed is not the suspension of democracy, but deeper democratization.^j This is why successful anti-corruption strategies need to understand their struggle as part and parcel of the larger struggle for deeper democratization.

Therefore in the Good Society, ‘thick democracy’ is the only game in town.³⁵ Democracy is nothing without elections and majority rule. To paraphrase

^j Saxer, Marc. Fighting corruption in transformation societies, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bangkok/ Berlin (2014).
<http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/thailand/10744.pdf>



Thomas Jefferson, however, ‘thin democracy’ is “nothing more than mob rule where 51% of the people may take away the rights of the other 49%”. Only ‘thick democracy’ provides the protection of civil liberties under the rule of law. Political rights are not merely defenses against the state, but entitlements to fully participate in political and social life. Politically, full participation in political life provides legitimacy for decision-making. Culturally, the dignity of being a full citizen works as the foundation for a democratic identity. With traditional identities under stress in the vertigo of change, this newfound sense of belonging provides the psychological resources for people to embrace change.

Laying the economic foundation: Full capabilities for all

At a time of rising demands for greater opportunities for all, Thailand’s economic engine begins to stutter. After decades of growth, the extractive growth model is hitting the glass ceiling of the Middle Income Trap. In an extractive political economy, innovation is not in the interest of the few who benefit from the status quo. Escaping the middle income trap requires to move up the value chain driven by inclusive and innovation led growth. Only inclusive institutions can unleash the necessary full potential of creative destruction. In other words, innovation is created by the intellectual, creative, organizational, and artisan skills of all members of society. To tap into this potential, substantial investment into human resources is needed.

Quality public services for all, however, cannot be financed at the current tax revenue level of a meager 16.5% of GDP. Thailand’s aspiration to reach the next stage of development therefore depends on the political will to increase tax

revenue somewhere near the OECD average of around 33% of GDP. At the same time, public funds need to be distributed more fairly. Under the current key, 72% of public funds go to Bangkok which accounts only for 26% of GDP and 12% of the population.³⁶ Some of the additional revenue has to be raised by a significant rise of the tax burden for the elites. These numbers, however, will not be sufficient. The bulk of the additional tax revenue will have to be contributed by the middle classes.

Given the revolt of the middle classes, however, any attempt to increase their share would be political suicide. As long as the middle class feels unsafe and abused, it will resist calls for solidarity with other segments of society. Confronted with rising demands of emerging classes for equal opportunities, the middle class refuses to pick up the bill. This shows that the middle income trap is in essence a political trap.

This is the dilemma of transformation: as long as demands for equal opportunities are not met, the majority population will continue to challenge the status quo. Social conflict will continue to destabilize the investment environment, hence crippling the ability to move up the value chain. On the other hand, as long as these citizens are not accepted as equals, the middle class will continue to reject the provision of quality public services for all as “populism”. In other words, the middle class holds the tax key to the new social contract, as well as to the next stage of economic development.

A sustainable economic order depends on the continuous reproduction of its social support base. Only social peace creates the open social climate needed to allow society to embrace the frightening process of creative destruction. The starting point for the new development model, therefore, must be to meet these political and social pre-conditions. Pro-poor models are sometimes resisted by the



middle class. Thus the new development model should create win-win solutions for all classes. Simply put both the middle class as well as the majority population need to benefit from the distribution of wealth, income and public services.

In order to tackle the economic, political, social and ecological challenges ahead, Thailand needs to shift its development path. A socially just, resilient and green dynamic growth model is needed to produce the material conditions of the Good Society.^k Shifting the development path means to implement a series of fundamental policy changes. In order to benefit from the emerging information and knowledge economy, investment in human capital is needed. The state and private sector need to provide quality education, infrastructure and public services to empower all members of society to explore their full potential. Maximizing labor productivity and innovativeness helps to escape the middle income trap by moving up the value chain. By boosting domestic consumption with progressive wage policies, Thailand can reduce its high vulnerability to external shocks caused by excessive export dependency. Fiscal sustainability and balanced accounts make the growth model more resilient. Embracing the potential of green growth allows boosting productivity through higher energy efficiency and improving energy security by adding renewables to the mix. The innovations triggered by the Third Industrial Revolution have the potential to make Thailand one of the centers of the 21st century's global economy.³⁷

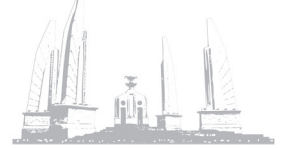
However, the inherent tensions between these objectives can quickly translate into tangible trade-offs on the policy level. Fundamental shifts in the political economy will face the resistance of those

who benefit from the status quo. Take, for example, the tension between socially just and green dynamic growth. On the policy level, the shift to a renewable energy regime requires phasing out fossil fuel subsidies. Exploding cost of living, however, may quickly turn into street protests. Well aware of the political risks, policy makers will be wary to address these challenges. This "political stickiness" is one of the causes for the path dependency which undermines the adaptation of the economic development model to new global and domestic realities.

In order to create the political will to change the development path, a change coalition is needed. However, given the divergent interests of social groups, a common platform is very hard to build on the policy level alone. To square the circle of policy trade-offs, new paradigms must be set. One of the critical paradigm shifts needed is to exit patronizing policies of subsidizing cost-of-living and develop policy schemes to empower people. In other words, Thailand needs to provide full capabilities for all.

Under the capabilities paradigm, neither the state nor the markets are ends in themselves, but means to provide full capabilities for all. The capabilities approach allows entering the next stage of innovation-led development by significantly expanding the investment into human resources. At the same time, by giving the middle classes quality public services in return for picking up the tax bill, it allows the state to generate the additional revenues needed to finance this investment without challenging fiscal sustainability. Socially, providing capabilities allows ending unsustainable cost-of-living subsidies without risking social unrest. In sum, what seemed suicidal on the policy level can be achieved by a paradigm shift to the capabilities approach.

^k Saxer, Marc. *The Economy of Tomorrow: How to produce socially just, resilient and green dynamic growth for a "Good Society"*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bangkok/ Berlin (2013).
<http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/thailand/10550.pdf>



Laying the normative foundation: Democratize political culture

A political and social order rests only in parts on the institutional hardware. Equally important is the “software”, namely the political culture which runs these institutions. In Thailand, despite all institutional engineering efforts, the patrimonial culture always creeps back in, sometimes perverting the intended outcomes of institutional reform.

This patrimonial culture is rooted in a ‘cultural constitution’, a set of unwritten norms and values which regulates the behavior of actors in the political and social field.³⁸ This ‘cultural constitution’ usually remains unaffected by institutional reforms, or is even deliberately strengthened by those who benefit from this ideological superstructure.

Democracy can only work if democratic institutions are operated under a democratic culture. This is why the underlying normative foundation of the political and social order needs to be democratized.

Again, such an “update of the cultural software” is not a purely academic exercise, but a discursive struggle with those who benefit from the traditional order. Winning the discursive struggle over normative paradigms depends on the ability to build new narratives to justify these shifts. Given the legal and social restriction to freedom of speech, it may be tactically advisable to focus the normative struggle on the narrative and metaphysical discourse level.

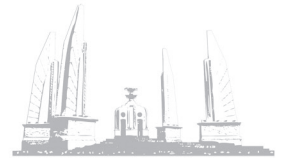
On the metaphysical level, it is necessary to challenge the notion that there can be only One Truth. This pre-modern ontology gives rise to the politics of truth: If those who believe to promote The Truth are righteous, then those who dissent are not only wrong but immoral. Conflict over competing claims to represent The Truth is one of

the key cleavages in the current Thai crisis. The static cosmology dominating the metaphysical discourse perceives this change as a threat, debates as divisive and diversity as decay. Based on this inner moral compass, embattled conservatives seek to suppress dissent and re-indoctrinate society with traditional values.

In such an environment, democracy cannot work. In order to function as a framework which allows all citizens an equal footing to deliberate on the way how to live together, a democratic culture as a normative foundation is needed. Hence, the ability to embrace social change, to accept dissenting viewpoints and openly compete with others over the right direction needs to be rooted in a modern metaphysical discourse. Such a shift in the metaphysical discourse will open the way to an understanding that norms and values can be and always have been adapted to changing social realities.

Second, the definition of unity as homogeneity is no longer able to produce social cohesion, trust and cooperation in a pluralist society. The warning mantra to refrain from voicing dissent as this “may cause social divisions and jeopardize national reconciliation” highlights this normative shift. As protests in the aftermath of the coup have shown, few things alienate Bangkok’s cosmopolitan middle class and “political peasants” more than crackdowns on freedom of expression. In fact, suppressing the diversity of lifestyles, ideologies and identities excludes people, and might lead to their withdrawal from society. A democratic normative order needs to embrace the diversity of a pluralist society. Hence, unity should be redefined as “strength from diversity” (*ex pluribus unum*).

Third, the necessary shift to the capabilities approach will be hard to implement as long as the Siamese interpretation of the Buddhist society holds sway. In the moralist discourse, a person’s



social status is largely predetermined by the karma collected in a prior life. In such a static social hierarchy justified by Buddhist cosmology, there is little hope for social mobility. In the moralist discourse, policies aiming at unleashing the potential of each member of society can easily be discredited as wasteful (“populism”). To open the way into human capital-led development, a more emancipatory reading of Buddhism is needed. If the core of Buddhism is the striving for enlightenment, then it can be argued that it is the noblest obligation of society to empower individuals in their quest for self-perfection. A socially engaged reading of Buddhism may produce a more favorable climate for the Good Society with full capabilities for all.³⁹

Many other normative “updates” have to follow. “Updating” does not mean to abandon norms, but to reinterpret them in a way which makes them more conducive to the needs and hopes of a pluralist society. Over the course of history, such “updates” happened frequently. Those who benefit from the ideological superstructure, however, will argue that norms are eternal, and denounce reinterpretations as betrayal of true ‘Thainess’. However, it is precisely because of this function as a source of reactionary power why norms and values have to be redefined in a democratic and pluralist way.

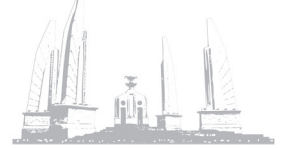
Intellectuals have a key role to play in this democratic deliberation over which norms need to be adapted and how. Academics, thinkers and opinion leaders need to “reopen history” by denying the sacredness of human made norms, exposing the political economy (cui bono?) behind cosmologies, offering alternative readings of traditions, myths and narratives. Newspaper feuilletons, journals and online fora should instigate such debates, and provide open platforms for voices from all sides to join in deliberation. Theatre, cinema and art need to lurk behind the facades,

explore the fear which has taken hold of society, and provoke the public to take a fresh look at things which are taken for granted. The transformation conflict cannot be overcome by suppressing debate and imposing unanimity, but on the contrary to by engaging in an open, inclusive and participatory societal debate about what is means to be Thai in the 21st century.

Inclusive social contract: The Good Society with full capabilities for all

The Good Society is built upon the understanding that political development, social peace and economic development are interdependent. Sustainable development is only possible if all three conditions are met. Seen from this functional perspective, the social contract can be read as societal consensus on a formula which allows all three dimensions of development to thrive. Socially, the Good Society tackles the crisis of social justice with an inclusive social compromise between all classes. Politically, deepening democracy reassures both majority and minorities, and empowers society to emancipate from the corrupt patronage system. Economically, the provision of capabilities for all paves the way out of the Middle Income Trap by moving up the value chain with innovation-led, inclusive growth. Normatively, a democratic political culture provides the software to run the complex mechanisms needed to govern a pluralistic society. Based on this inclusive social contract, the Good Society lays out a practical utopia everyone could agree on behind the ‘veil of ignorance’⁴⁰. By addressing the transformation conflict with four inclusive compromises, the Good Society opens the way into a better future.

To allow this practical utopia to emerge, society needs to shift the paradigm towards the provision of full capabilities for all. The capabilities paradigm



offers the win-win formula which allows society to strike inclusive compromises. The capabilities paradigm is good economics, because investment into human resources allows Thailand to compete in a global knowledge economy. The capabilities platform is good politics, because it promises solid electoral majorities by reaching out both to the hopes and needs of emerging classes while at the same time offering the middle classes quality public services in return for their tax bills. The capabilities paradigm allows building an inclusive normative foundation by combining the struggles of those who seek distributional justice with those who want justice of recognition.⁴¹ By addressing the crisis of social justice, the capabilities paradigm lays the groundwork for a social compromise between all classes and opens the window to strike a new social contract.

Shifting towards the capabilities paradigm alone, however, will not suffice. This has again to do with the paradox of transformation. On the one hand, universal consent on an inclusive social contract is the necessary precondition for the capabilities paradigm. Generating the tax revenue needed to provide full capabilities to all is hardly possible without the consent of the middle classes and enlightened elites. On the other hand, it is the very provision of full capabilities for all that will ease the social conflict and open the way for the social peace craved for by the elites and middle classes. In other words, concluding a social contract requires a leap of faith by all sides. Embedding the capabilities paradigm into the more comprehensive political, social, economic and normative compromises is therefore the best way to create the win-win formula everybody can agree on.

Based on a solid social, political and normative foundation, and driven by an inclusive economic engine, the Good Society is the formula which allows political, social and economic development to thrive. By providing a compass, the Good Society

points the way out of the transformation conflict. By laying out a concrete vision of how to benefit from the “Golden Asian Century”, the Good Society is a practical utopia people can believe in.

V. PRACTICAL APPROACH: Policy-making in a pluralist society

“To improve is to change; to be perfect is to change often.”

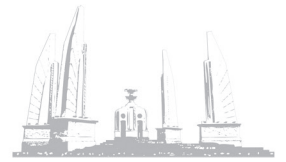
Winston Churchill

Fully achieving this practical utopia may never be possible. Moving society towards this vision, however, is what really matters. Unsurprisingly, even when following this win-win formula, the practical challenges ahead are monumental.

Simply put, transformation societies need to explore new ways of organizing political life. In a mass polity with both a complex economy and a pluralistic society, policy-making can no longer be centralized and vertical. In a contractual culture, policy-makers have to seek the consent of citizens. This means the old way of policy-making - backroom power-brokers using technocrats to run the administration - can no longer work. To be able to process the needed information, balance competing interests or communicate policy shifts, the policy-making process needs to include many more stakeholders beyond the immediate governance structure of government, parliament and administration. This means social actors need to abandon the dichotomy between “politicians” and “non-politicians” and understand themselves as policy-shapers.⁴²

V 1 Driving the political agenda with political communication

In consolidated democracies, with the use of force banned from the political process, political communication is one of the key instruments of



policy-making. Political communication is no longer merely an instrument to “sell” decisions taken, but an integral part of the policy-making process. Political communication drives public debates, builds alliances, frames issues, sets the agenda or changes the conversation. By defining “what is happening” and “what needs to be done”, it is a major source of power. For every policy initiative, the political battlefield needs to be prepared by political communication. By rooting policy initiatives in political myths and pointing to a better future, narratives have to explain why change is needed.⁴³

The need for change, however, will be denied by those who are invested in the status quo. In times of rapid social change, many people tend to hold on to symbols as an anchor for their identity. Acutely aware of the ideological value of such symbols, elite actors tend to make use of conservative myths as a justification for the traditional order. By insisting that “there is no alternative”, the status quo alliance aims to prevent the emergence of a change coalition. This is why in order to open the way for democratic change, a series of strategic discourse battles need to be won.

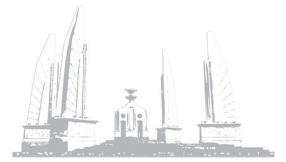
Political communication is a critical tool in this struggle. By building discourse alliances, political communication plays a crucial role in formatting the political playing field.⁴⁴ Starting from a thorough analysis of the discourse landscape, political communication aims at building bridges between neighboring discourse communities. In other words, the foundation for political coalitions has to be built well in advance by discursively shaping common platforms on which groups with different interests and diverging values can join forces.

V 2 Policy Communities: Building informal frameworks for sustainable policy-making

In the polarized atmosphere of the political conflict, little attention is given to important questions such as the future energy regime, educational reform, social security or fiscal sustainability. Most “politicians” seem preoccupied with short-term personal or political gains. Those who care for the long-term common good rarely stay in power for long, and policy changes are often overturned by the next government or the courts.

The nature of politics will always be reactive, ad hoc, interest-driven and prone to frequent and quick changes of direction. The process of policy-making, however, can be channeled towards long-term goals. Policy-making should be less understood as a series of individual battles over policy initiatives, but as a stream of political decisions by many parallel and consecutive policy makers. Channeling the political process requires the widening of the policy-making process well beyond the immediate governing institutions. Around the inner core of decision-makers, a corona of policy-shapers is needed to channel the long-term trajectory of policy-making.

Different from the old bureaucratic polity dominated by a small group of technocrats, today policy-makers need to check their technical solutions for political viability. Public hearings may help to widen participation, but usually fail to move forward the often complicated technical debates. Policy-shapers need to deliver comprehensive political strategies for creating political will and public acceptance, including societal change coalitions and change narratives. These political considerations may lead to adjustments not only in language but also substance of policy recommendations.



Policy communities are a better way to square the circle between the needs for inclusiveness and expertise. Policy communities aim at engaging all relevant stakeholders in a particular sector in an ongoing conversation. For example, an energy policy community could bring together civil servants from all relevant ministries and political parties, parliamentarians and representatives from the industry, labor unions, think tanks, university institutes, non-governmental watchdogs and grassroots activists in a never-ending series of conferences, workshops, and seminars. These policy debates need to be organized by a variety of hosts and cover the entire spectrum of relevant topics. Policy communities give voice to societal actors and work as a training ground for future decision-makers. Policy communities are particularly helpful for junior policy-makers to develop expertise and emancipate from their party patrons.

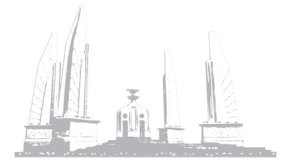
However, the strategic goal of policy communities is not mere freedom of expression, but shaping the policy-making process. The public debate needs to be driven forward, towards the ultimate goal of policy implementation. This means building a broad societal coalition by integrating as many interests as possible, finding common ground by striking compromises and developing a common narrative for change. If successful, the policy community can produce the Holy Grail of politics: technically sensible policies supported by a societal majority.

Having participated in these debates from the beginning, decision-makers will have ownership for these proposals. Even if decision-makers did not regularly participate in the policy community, the necessary expertise for any policy initiative is very likely to be provided by civil servants and experts who did.

Hence, on a structural level, policy communities replace the role of the patronage network in providing key functions in the political process such

as representing social groups, forging compromises and distributing resources. By forging social consensus and common ground, they allow to drive the policy-making process forward despite political volatility and administrative incompetence.

Finally, the democratic political process needs to strike a balance between conflict and consensus. Too much conflict paralyses the decision making process and may deteriorate into violent confrontation. Too much consensus stifles necessary debate and innovation, and may lead to path dependency. Both extremes are dangerous in times of rapid internal and external changes. Thai society needs to be certain enough of its own strength and identity in order to embrace constant change. Partly, this confidence is reinforced by the proven ability to solve problems and find innovative solutions. Partly, inclusive participation in political life can strengthen social cohesion. Political communities can contribute to all of these needs.



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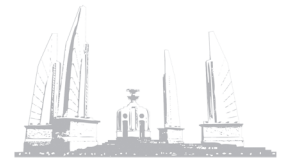
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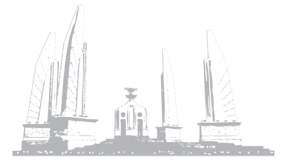
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