Chapter 11
"For King and Country"? Thailand's Political Conflicts as Dynamics of Social Closure

Allan Lee

1 Introduction

For a country with a rich history of social movements,[1] the recent People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) movement appeared to be different from other social movements in Thailand's history in several respects. Firstly, despite the heterogeneity within the PAD (Pye and Schaffar 2008), a large portion of its support base consists largely of the urban middle class. This differed from the middle-class-led movement in May 1992, which has been touted as an epitome of democratization in Thailand (see Hewison 1996; Pathmanand 2008). Secondly, never has any movement in the country's history resulted in such a drastic political polarization of Thai society. Empirically, the question of why the Bangkok middle class supported such a movement spills over to an important theoretical question of the relationship between class, democracy, and social movements. This chapter, then, aims to address these concerns by advocating a theoretical framework that allows for a more dynamic appreciation of both historical and empirical realities.

Following the 2006 coup d'état, much work has been done on this political conflict (see Tejapira 2006; Ungpakorn 2007; Case 2007; Ockey 2008; Connors 2008; Connors and Hewison 2008; Phongpaichit and Baker 2008b; Pye and

[1] Somchai Phatharathananunth (2006) examined the struggle of the Small Scale Farmers' Assembly of *Isan* (SSFAI) in Northeast Thailand from 1993 to 2002. Consider also Suthy Prasartset (1980) who looked at nongovernmental group's (NGOs) movements in Thailand since 1969 with the establishment of the Thailand Rural Reconstruction Movement (TRRM), the first nongovernmental development group in Thailand. Jim Ockey (2002) highlights the protest of 22 January 1956, arguing that the protest that took to the streets has been forgotten despite its influence in shaping much of the political sphere in Thailand for a couple of decades after the event itself. The point is that Thailand has a rich history of social movements that spans over at least half a century, yet none of them involved the taking over of airports.

A. Lee (✉)
Department of Sociology, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore, 11 Arts Link, Singapore 117570, Singapore
e-mail: allan.lee.al@gmail.com

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Schaffar 2008; Winichakul 2008; Pathmanand 2008; Funston 2009; Kitirianglarp and Hewison 2009; McCargo 2009; Montesano 2009a; Nostitz 2009[2]; see also Chap. 12 in this volume). While these were certainly commendable, there are several points that ought to be addressed. Many have attempted to answer the important questions of why and how the movement emerged: these explanations revolve around two broader themes of intra-elite struggle and Thaksin's corruption. Albritton and Bureekul (2007: 23), for instance, suggest that Thaksin was seen as competing with the king, by "insinuating himself into ceremonies honoring the 60th year of the king's accession to the throne." Similarly, Connors (2007: 252) emphasized that the movement was a consequence of Thaksin attempting to replace the "old power group – a network based around the palace, Prem, elements of the Democrat Party, members of prominent establishment families and senior bureaucrats – with his own network of intimates and associates" (see also Ungpakorn 2009). On the other hand, scholars such as Pongsudhirak (2008: 142) highlight the "controversies, contradictions, and corruption allegations" of Thaksin's administration and how these contributed to the displeasure toward the ex-premier (see also Case 2007; Connors and Hewison 2008; Phongpaichit and Baker 2008b; Pye and Schaffar 2008; Pathmanand 2008; McCargo 2009 for more explanations[3]). See also Chaps. 8, 10, 12, and 13 in this volume.

Next, in conceptualizing the movement as one about democracy, or even royalism, from the onset, I contend that it limits the appreciation of the phenomenon on hand. In other words, the explicit focus on democracy (see Pongsudhirak 2008; Kitirianglarp and Hewison 2009) assumes that the movement had little to do with issues deeply embedded in Thai society, such as class interests. Many authors, popular media, and pundits have tended to assume and refer to *a* middle class – usually understood as occupying the "middle" of the socioeconomic spectrum. This premise confuses and conflates more than it clarifies, by representing the PAD movement as consisting of the Thai middle class. This has left those who are less attuned to the developments of the movement with the notion that the Thai middle class, as a whole, supports the PAD movement.

This (mis)representation of the PAD supporters has, in turn, placed serious limitations on seeing the movement as one for democracy or even royalism.

[2] Kevin Hewison (2010) provides a relatively balanced review of Nostitz's book, noting that while this written account is "not scholarly, [but] nor is it meant to be" (Hewison 2010: 523), it is influential enough to become "a book that anyone who has a serious interest in Thailand's politics should have" (Hewison 2010: 525). It is important to note as well that, as Hewison highlights, Nostitz's account is not "an entirely non-partisan account as he shows sympathy for the red-shirted campaigners" (Hewison 2010: 523). Nevertheless, the attempt to capture the developments of events places it as one of the foremost accounts on the movement to date.

[3] In addition to these articles, others have attempted to offer a perspective that focused on Thaksin's mistakes in isolating the Bangkokians and his policy mistakes (see, for instance, Tejapira 2006; Connors 2007; Hewison 2008; Pongsudhirak 2008; Montesano 2009b). Nevertheless, I maintain that these explanations are seldom divorced from the idea of a conflict of interests between the Thai elites, such as military leaders and the ex-prime minister.

I maintain that this is an unintended consequence of considering class as a set of fixed categories – usually economic ones – rather than a dynamic outcome of social and economic processes, and conflicts. A weakness of this perspective is that we are unable to move beyond understanding class as "mere incumbents of positions, or embodiments of systemic forces" (Parkin 1979: 4). This is especially salient when we consider how the presence of cross-class alliances among members of both the Yellow and Red Shirts does not negate it from being a class conflict, as some scholars have argued (see Montesano 2009a; Nostitz 2009; Prasirtsuk 2010; see also Chaps. 8, 10, 12, and 13 in this volume). It is precisely because there are groups of people from similar socioeconomic status contesting for dissimilar interests that it would be more useful to think of several groups – or *classes* – occupying the "middle" stratum of society. Accordingly, a Weberian perspective of class seems particularly appropriate.

In that light, I maintain that a perspective that privileges the Marxian conceptualization of class hinders us from fully appreciating it as a dynamic concept. More importantly, it limits the appreciation of the Yellow Shirts movement to a matter of intra-elite conflict, overlooking the significance of the participation of the masses. Following Parkin's (1979: 13) argument that "the relations between classes are to be understood as 'aspects of the distribution of power,'" this chapter proposes a neo-Weberian perspective be included alongside the predominant Marxian stance in examining political conflict in Thai society. In essence, this chapter suggests two things: first, that a neo-Weberian stance offers us constructive insights to appreciating the concatenation of political conflicts in Thai society, and, second, that the recent PAD movement can be understood as an attempt by particular groups of people to secure their interests in response to the social exclusion experienced. This chapter presents a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics between the military, monarchy, and capitalist groups – key actors in the Thai political sphere – as well as the masses, allowing for the involvement of actors from various social positions in society to be included in this struggle for social, economic, and political inclusion. In doing so, I suggest that the occurrences of social movements and political conflict reflect the process of class formation in Thailand as members from various strata of society attempt to consolidate and solidify their social positions, as we shall see.

In other words, this chapter aims to utilize and apply the concept of "social closure" to making sense of the political conflict throughout Thailand's history as well as the recent movements.

2 The Efficacy of "Social Closure" as Theoretical Framework

A Weberian paradigm sees classes and social groups being connected within the sphere of power and attached to the important notion of the distribution of power. For Weber, multiple overlapping dimensions of wealth, power, and prestige

determine social stratification (Gerth and Mills 1958). In fact, "the term 'class' refers to any group of people that is found in the same class situation" (Gerth and Mills 1958: 181). Simply put, people displaying similar lifestyle patterns and occupational class and who enjoy similar prestige and privilege constitute members of the same class.

In addition, Weber (1978) argues that there are three features of class: economic interest, life chances, and markets (see also Gerth and Mills 1958). The concept of *interest* is especially useful for not only does it "create[s] 'class'" (Weber 1978: 928), but it is among the "most fundamental and universal components" of human behavior (Weber 1978: 601). Furthermore,

> the concept of divergent sectional 'interests' cannot be limited to economic interests, but must be extended to other spheres of social life. Thus political parties, for example, have interests which derive from their situation as aspirants to, or as wielders of, power, and such interests do not necessarily rest upon shared class situations. (Giddens 1971: 195)

The concept of status groups – defined by the specific lifestyle shared by members of the group – is especially relevant for it not only makes up the social order but is determined by the distribution of social honor. Rather than rely on economic indicators, such as income, occupation, and assets, in stratifying society, status groups consider noneconomic qualities such as political power too. In short, status groups allow us to integrate social, economic, and political power into determining one's social position. More significantly, Weber says that entry into these status groups is often restricted, what he calls *social closure*.

This concept has been elaborated on by Parkin (1979: 44–45) who conceptualizes this process as an exclusionary relationship in which

> social collectivities seek to maximize rewards by restricting access to resources and opportunities to a limited circle of eligibles…securing for itself a privileged position at the expense of some other group through a process of subordination.

Parkin also notes that any group attribute may be emphasized for

> the monopolization of specific, usually economic opportunities. This monopolization is directed against competitors who share some positive or negative characteristics; its purpose is always the closure of social and economic opportunities to *outsiders*. (emphasis in original)

Just as dominant groups seek to exclude others in order to preserve their advantage, groups who have been dispossessed will also attempt to amass opportunities for themselves (see Tilly 1998). In doing so, Parkin (1979: 74) suggests that groups in such an outsider position will mount "usurpationary actions" with "the aim of biting into the resources and benefits accruing to dominant groups in society." For Parkin, "usurpationary closure tends to rely on the public mobilization of members and supporters, as in the use of strikes, demonstrations, sit-ins, marches…and the like."

This concept is especially useful if we were to reexamine the historico-political antecedents in Thai society where we will find important players attempting to exclude and usurp both power and opportunities in the political arena.

3 Social Closure in Thai Political History

From the onset, the fall of absolute monarchy at the start of the 1930s paved the way for a political sphere that has been characterized by the frequent involvement of the military, coups d'état, and the wrestling of power between the army and the state. Led by a group of Western-educated military officers and civilian bureaucrats (Leow 2002), the absolute monarchy was overthrown in the name of democracy in 1932 (Jumbala and Banpasirichote 2001) and came to bolster the political and economic power of Bangkok (Glassman 2010). The royalists did not remain silent, however, following the fall of the absolute monarchy. In fact, they fought for a monarch[4] with as much power as possible within the framework of democracy, albeit with little success (Winichakul 2008). Yet by 1938, the military was, more or less, in full control and began introducing authoritarian policies, this time under the leadership of Plaek Phibunsongkhram (Hewison 1996). The fall of the monarchy ushered in a new economic and political era for Thailand. By the end of the 1930s, Thailand had a well-established "commercialization, monetization, and commodification of the economy" despite not having a full-fledged capitalist system (Hewison 2006: 83). This paved the way for the eventual emergence of the domestic capitalists.

The fear of a growing Chinese-dominated business class, coupled with the potential threat to sovereignty, led Phibun to adopt a "nationalist clientelism" (Ramsay 2001: 61) approach to address this concern. Apart from closing down Chinese-language schools and the mandatory taking of Thai names by Chinese in Thailand, anti-Chinese economic policies were imposed as well (Ramsay 2001). By the end of World War II, the culminated effects of the world depression which forced many Western businesses to withdraw from the country left the Sino-Thais with even more economic influence (Ramsay 2001) while Thailand's economy fell behind the rest of Southeast Asia. The economic surplus remained in the hands of a small group of economic elites – including the Sino-Thai businessmen as well as the "old nobility, tiny new segment of businessmen, professionals and officials" (Phongpaichit and Baker 2008a). Comprising a small proportion of Thai population, this group of elites came to take firm control of Thai economy, controlling the financial and industrial sectors (Hewison 1993). Due to the prevailing animosity toward the Chinese, this group did not, or could not, as a "class," "effectively or adequately control the state and its apparatuses" as the economic and political condition limited the growth of this group after World War II (Turton 1984: 29). This enmity left them fairly small, limiting their wealth as well as political influence (Anderson 1990). With the military government in charge, little protection was given to domestic capital as business families had to subject themselves to the patronage of political

[4] In Thongchai Winichakul's talk entitled "Thailand's Crisis and the Rise of Asia," delivered on June 7, 2011, he made the distinction between monarchy – which he defined as the "network monarchy" (McCargo 2005) – and monarch, referring to King Bhumibol. In this chapter, I borrow these definitions as well to differentiate the various actors. Specifically, in this chapter "monarch" refers to HM King Bhumibol and "monarchy" refers to the institution.

leaders in order to negotiate individual protection (Phongpaichit and Baker 2008a). The Phibun regime eventually faced challenges in 1956 when thousands took to the streets. This incident was touted as a victory for democracy for it signaled that the people were ready to exercise their views and political power (see Ockey 2002). While he was to remain in power for two more years, General Sarit, with the support of students, the monarchy, and the Democrat Party, carried out a coup that finally removed Phibun from power in 1957[5] (Ockey 2002).

This event was to be, in Chaloemitiarana's (1978) opinion, the most important event in the revitalization of the monarchy as it not only marked the removal of the men behind the 1932 revolution but also meant that Sarit, one of the first leaders since 1932 to consistently and consciously build up the monarchy's prestige, was back in a prominent position. The king, concerned about the threat of communism and anti-royalist opinions, allied himself to the military and demonstrated this visibly – dressing in military uniform and adopting the role of the natural leader of the military for instance. The military reciprocated by incessantly promoting the royal family through the celebration of its deeds and highly publicized events (see also Handley 2006; Hewison 2008). Throughout this period, the Chinese business class, perhaps still struggling with the prevailing hostility against them, remained small and lacked substantial political influence (Anderson 1990).

With the influx of foreigners and accompanying investment due to increasing globalization, Thailand began experiencing economic growth and unprecedented modernization in the 1960s (Maisrikrod 1997). The resultant economic growth drastically changed the sociodemographic conditions of Thai society, posing challenges to the authoritarian regime (Ockey 2004). As the economy developed, the demand for education grew alongside the expansion of the middle class that had emerged as a result of the economic boom (Ockey 2004; see also Hewison 1996; Robison and Goodman 1996). These changes meant that politics could not remain authoritarian for long, as the capitalists rode on the new economic wave and capitalized on the government's policy and developed various industries.

The open economy was also "beneficial to democratization" as it threatened to subvert authoritarian repression of democratic ideals (Laothamatas 1996 cited in Jumbala and Banpasirichote 2001). As the economy opened up, the new Thai middle class, emergent from the growing economy, joined private corporations or became entrepreneurs instead of joining the civil service as they had previously done. This departure from government employment, coupled with the liberalization of Thailand's economy, strengthened both the middle class and bourgeoisie class, paving the way for the alliance between these classes in the 1980s. Overall, the development and growth of the economy furthered the cause of the capitalists through the economic expansion as well as the political influence of the business group, securing further protection from the state.

[5] Sarit was seen as having cynically manipulated public opinion through his criticism of "dirty elections" and then installed a regime that did away with most of the political system completely (Chaloemitiarana 1978).

By the turn of the decade, the influence of the capitalists had grown, gaining ground in economic policy-making and becoming politically independent and assertive. The relationship between the state and capital was now forced to find a new balance while taking into account the sociodemographic changes in Thai society (Maisrikrod 1997). At the same time, the military appeared to be testing the king's authority when it killed off the parliament the king had pushed for 3 years earlier in 1968. This incident demonstrated the extent to which the monarch had actually cared about democracy – for "while the king had pushed for constitution in 1968, he 'did little to enhance the legitimacy and status of the elected parliament, participant politics…or the institutions created to implement Thai-style democracy…leaving the parliament exposed and vulnerable to…the military'" (Morell 1974, cited in Hewison 2008: 197).

Up until the end of the 1960s, the military, monarchy, and the business "class" had experienced several forms of exclusion, largely as a consequence and result of socioeconomic developments in the region. Nevertheless, the relationship between these historic actors has only gotten more entwined as each attempts to secure economic and political power through various means. The domination of the military and the monarchy, as well as its supporters, in the political sphere had begun to accommodate the rise of the capitalists who had been in control of the economy, effectively sharing a piece of the pie with them. While this tripartite relationship has achieved a dedicated balance, it was in the early 1970s that the scale was tipped, paving the way for an era of social movements that sought to exclude one or more party, with the other attempting to usurp power and gain access to the exclusive political and economic spheres.

The 1973 student-led movement was an attempt to overthrow the Thanom-led regime that had been in power since 1963 (see Leow 2002; Anderson 1990). This demonstrated how the exclusion of the "new middle class" has come to be seen in the attempts of usurpationary actions, usually undertaken by the marginalized and excluded. The impetus behind the 1973 movement was the demand for an immediate "promulgation of a new democratic constitution" (Neher 1975: 1103). The implications of such a proliferation of democracy meant not only a conceding of power by those in power but also the adoption of liberal-democratic agenda – including an autonomous parliamentary system, safeguarding of human rights, the decentralization of power, media freedom, and unbiased economic policy (Phongpaichit 2004).

Most significant during the Cold War era of the 1970s was the recognition that a military dictatorship would pose more danger, not only to the public but to the economy as well. Members of the capitalist group then orchestrated a democratization project (Phongpaichit 2004). Not only did this mark the division of the military-capitalist alliance that had emerged post-World War II, the breakdown of the alliance also signaled the advent of the economic middle class as a strong political actor (Maisrikrod 1997) and ushered in a period of political instability as elections failed to produce stable governments (Connors and Hewison 2008). Another important development was the growth of the economic middle class and the intellectuals along with the deteriorating strength of the military dictatorship as

its legitimacy began to erode. The domestic capitalists thus distanced themselves from the army and aligned themselves to the foreign investors who were adverse to the military's style of governance. This also meant the capitalists adopted a position that placed them on the side of the middle class as this new alliance fought for a democratic regime – one that essentially espoused an anti-military sentiment (Maisrikrod 1997). The military was on the verge of being gradually edged out of the Thai political sphere.

However, the espousal of socialist thoughts among the intelligentsia led to fear among the capitalists, who were quick to re-embrace the capitalist system and maintain the status quo, putting an end to the alliance between the capitalists and intellectuals (Maisrikrod 1997). The resultant consequence of this episode was the ideological polarization of Thai politics between the radicals, allegedly out to demolish the national pillars of "nation, religion, and king" (Maisrikrod 1997; see also Niels 2000), on the one hand, and the conservatives, who mobilized the bureaucrats and other religious groups, on the other. The events of this period demonstrated the shift of Thai politics away from the elites to include the middle class. Furthermore, it illustrates the presence of important social groups acting and interacting in Thai society, contesting and asserting different forms of power in an attempt to exclude other players. Anderson (1990: 23) sums this up by noting that this period bears witness to the emergence of parliamentary democracy whereby "ambitious, prosperous and self-confident bourgeoisies feel most comfortable, precisely because it maximizes their power and minimizes that of their competitors."

After 1977, the military continued to exert strong political influence, albeit within a parliamentary framework as Thailand was led by a constitutional and parliamentary regime under the leadership of former military leaders, the most prominent was General Prem Tinsulanonda who was appointed to the position of prime minister in 1980 (Cohen 1991), and the nation entered an era of "semi-democracy" (Girling 1996), otherwise known as "Premocracy." Given the control the military had, political stability and economic growth were accorded greater priority during this period as well (Girling 1996). Although the inclination toward an authoritarian regime was present, Prem chose a conservative style of leadership, one that was acceptable to most of Thai society, and displayed much loyalty to the king, gaining important royal support.

In April 1981, Prem was involved in the suppression of a coup staged by a section of the Thai military – known as the Young Turks – who commanded a significant segment of the armed forces (Cohen 1991; Leow 2002). This faction consisted of younger, lower-ranking field officers who embraced a more radical belief in the Thai military's role in saving the nation and advocating socioeconomic reform – in particular, a full democratic system – under the leadership of the military, not the civilian government (Sirikrai 1982; Leow 2002). Supposedly, it was the internal politics within the military – specifically the rumored transfer of the Young Turks to less significant posts – that sparked off the coup (see Sirikrai 1982). With the lack of support from higher-ranking officials, students, intellectuals, and workers, the coup failed to gather sufficient momentum and was easily contained. An important repercussion of the failed coup was the resulting schism within the Thai army

into two main opposing groups led by General Amnart Damrikarn and Major General Arthit Kamlang-ek, the latter having a crucial role in defeating the coup attempt in 1981. However, Amnart's influence continued to pose a serious threat to Arthit's power until his untimely death. Despite the demise of his main rival, Arthit persisted in his efforts to weed out the Young Turks and securing his own position. In a bid to conciliate the factions within the military, Prem called for an election in April 1983 where he was reappointed as the prime minister. The army again opposed constitutional clauses that would have accorded more power to political parties (Cohen 1991).

Overall, the Prem era ushered in both political stability and economic growth, demonstrating the ability of Prem's "grand alliance" – a "new class formation" consisting of capitalists, state bureaucrats and military officers, intellectuals, professional groups, and technocrats – in affecting the power balance of the state (Surin 1997). The Thai political sphere, for the first time, saw businesspeople running for, and winning, parliamentary seats during this period as vote-buying began to spread widely as a means of mobilizing electoral support (Maisrikrod 1997; see also King and LoGerfo 1996). This period also saw the entry of young, well-educated and politically idealistic middle class into influential roles in Thai politics, some of which had migrated to Bangkok from the rural areas. This was especially significant as their presence meant that they were no longer under a feudalistic-authoritarian state apparatus and more importantly, they say saw democracy as an accessible tool to express their opposition against state power (Maisrikrod 1997).

In short, while Prem and his alliance effectively controlled both the economy and the state, the idealistic new middle class continued to pose political opposition from time to time. This was especially so in the late 1980s and early 1990s where the middle class began to demand their inclusion into the system. Prem's "grand alliance," by virtue of its exclusionary nature, had failed to incorporate the politically volatile middle class during its sovereignty. This led to pressures from the middle class who wanted to be included. It did not help that Prem's view of democracy was merely a show of tokenism, with his perceived contempt for democratic institutions and a lack of commitment to the ideology of democracy (Maisrikrod 1997). It was no surprise, then, that the populist Chart Thai Party, fronted by General Chatichai Choonhavan, was elected into power in the 1988 elections.

It was because Chatichai's party's stance coincided with the prodemocratic middle class' scheme that he was able to ride on that wave to power (Maisrikrod 1997). Furthermore, the rise of Chatichai rested largely upon the prevalent anti-Prem, prodemocracy sentiment of that time, which was so strong that practically anybody in parliament could be accepted as the prime minister. In other words, support for Chatichai was, in part, an effort to usurp power, albeit democratically, away from Prem's "grand alliance."

However, the Chatichai government was inundated with blatant corruption – earning the name of a "buffet cabinet" (Maisrikrod 1997; also in Hewison 1993). The parochialism within the Chatichai government – where *jao poh* (or godfathers) and local influential people were dominant (Maisrikrod 1997: 161) – sought to consolidate public power and wealth among members of the "alliance" and contributed

to an overarching atmosphere of disdain among the middle class (Maisrikrod 1997; also in Hewison 1993). What infuriated the people even more was Chatichai's final reorganization of the cabinet, which further promoted the financial interests of the various coalition members while marginalizing those who are not part of the group even more (Hewison 1993; Maisrikrod 1997). This led to the eventual downfall of Chatichai just 2 years and 7 months after he first ascended into premiership as a new political alliance emerged. This coalition consisted mainly of state bureaucrats and "enlightened capitalists," but was legitimated by the middle class (Maisrikrod 1997; see also Jumbala and Banpasirichote 2001). It should be noted here, though, that there were variations among the middle class as up until the mid-1980s; they, on the whole, benefited greatly from the export-oriented growth under the Chatichai government. Nonetheless, the military quickly capitalized on the prevailing discontent and staged a coup in February 1991 (Neher 1992; King and LoGerfo 1996; Leow 2002). Support for the coup, as Hewison (1996) notes, was an attack on the Chatichai government that was seen as threatening the balance constituting the state and the political space. More importantly, the coup represented also the manifestation of "inter-clique rivalry[6]" as well as an attempt to reinforce the military's increasingly archaic position in relation to the advent of the new middle class (Hewison 1996).

Following the coup, the National Peace Keeping Council (NPKC) set up an interim government led by Anand Panyarachun (Leow 2002). However, it was the council that held onto the power while preparation was made for the elections in March (Hewison 1993). During that election, many pro-military parties as well as opposition parties participated, but it was the former that won, putting Narong Wongwan in the prime minister seat (Leow 2002). However, Narong's past returned to haunt him and cost him the support of the military (King 1992). The subsequent nomination of General Suchinda Kraprayoon by the military leaders faced much criticism from the public as it indicated a return to military rule (King 1992). More importantly, it was a direct violation of Suchinda's earlier promise that things would be turned back over to the civilians to resume democracy with new leadership.

While the vocal and aggressive middle-business class alliance that brought Chatichai down earlier played a similarly significant role in opposing the Suchinda regime in May 1992 (Maisrikrod 1997; Jumbala and Banpasirichote 2001), it is important to note that for certain groups within the middle class, economic growth and democracy were the perfect complements and the 1991 coup only interrupted this progression. For them, the coup had direct and undesirable impact on the middle class' economic interests. Thus, the appointing of Suchinda became the tipping point in a long process of the military manipulating its dominance in politics. Consequently, the middle class rode on the prevailing "democratization" wave and

[6] The 1991 coup was widely recognized as, partly, a result of conflict between different cohorts of graduates of the Chulachomklao Royal Military Academy, starting as early as in the 1980 and finally culminating in a major division between the military and the government. In addition, leaders of the National Peace Keeping Council (NPKC), which staged the coup, were known to have concrete political ideas and ambitions and wanted a larger share of the corruption pie (King 1992); Pathmanand 2008).

opposed the military-appointed Suchinda government. In other words, democracy was not the end point. Instead, members of this middle class advocated democracy insofar as it provided the political stability and economic development that they desired. Ultimately, the middle class was fighting to protect the source of its privileges – capitalism and development (Jumbala and Banpasirichote 2001).

It was no surprise, then, that the May 1992 uprising – also known as the "Black May" incident – came to be seen as a revolution of the middle and business classes. Popular images from the protests depicted wealthy demonstrators – some carrying mobile phones and arriving in cars (Jumbala and Banpasirichote 2001) – taking to the streets and challenging armed troops (Hewison 1996). From a political viewpoint, it implied that classes that emerged during the postwar economic growth were driving Thai sociopolitical change. Also, the protest appeared to be a revolt against a "conservative, authoritarian, technocratic, and military-dominated coterie" in order to reinstate legitimate political space and a democratic parliamentary system (Hewison 1996). Indeed, it is easy to overlook the underlying workings behind the rise of the middle class against the government and simply regard it as a movement for democracy.

Following the violent suppression of demonstrations, another election was scheduled in September 1992. This time, Chuan Leekpai emerged victorious. The triumph of a civilian government confirmed the end of military rule in Thailand (Leow 2002). While this meant that the military elites no longer dominated politics directly, they maintain firm influence in the area of national defense and security while the ties between them and their associates in the business sector remained intact (Bunbongkarn 1996). However, soon after the Chuan administration assumed office, they faced accusations of having abused a land distribution scheme in Phuket (King 1996). With increasing pressure from the media – an institution owned by the business class – and the lack of support from its own coalition members, Chuan's government was eventually brought down in May 1995 (Phongpaichit and Baker 1997) after the parliament was dissolved. A subsequent snap election was scheduled for July 1995 (King 1996). That particular election saw extensive vote-buying despite efforts from the Poll Watch Committee to curb such actions (King 1996). Eventually, Banharn Silpa-archa became the new prime minster. However, almost as soon as he and his cabinet took office, criticisms began to surface – again, from the privately owned media – claiming that they lacked the technical expertise and qualifications, claiming "infighting among and within government coalition parties" as well as criticizing Banharn's lack of international stature and sophistication (King 1996: 137). Meanwhile, shuffles were made within the military as the Defense Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh balanced out the internally competing factions (King 1996). On the one hand, it demonstrated the extent of civilian control over the military. On the other hand, this was in largely motivated by Chavalit's attempt to build up support for himself among the military officers as he prepared for a shot at the premiership in the future (King 1996). True enough, Chavalit took the premiership in the November 1996 election after increasing pressure and conflict within Banharn's coalition took its toll on the Banharn's government, forcing him to resign (King 1996). Chavalit did not last long, however, due to a combination of the Asian

economic crisis in 1997 and his failure to manage the country in the midst of the financial crisis (Punyaratabandhu 1998), and Chuan regained the seat of prime minister. It was toward the end of this decade of political instability that Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai (TRT) Party was formed and eventually rose to power (see also Chaps. 10, 12, and 13).

4 Social Closure Under Thaksin's Regime

Broadly speaking, Thaksin's populist policies that resonated with and benefitted the poor meant that they were no longer marginalized. As witnessed by the power of Thaksin's supporters to reelect him into power in the 2005 elections, the implication of this support was that the middle class' votes no longer carried as much influence as it used to. Thaksin's populist policies which translated into mass support and manifested in election votes (see Pongsudhirak 2008; Phongpaichit and Baker 2009) meant that politically and socially, the rural poor were gaining more recognition and regard by Thaksin's government. Politically, the middle class had suffered a minor setback in exerting its voice; economically, it could neither transform its economic wealth to political or social power, nor could it depend on political support to attain economic success. This loss of social and political power together with the declining economy was indicative of the exclusion the middle class was to be subjected to. It also was evident that Thaksin and his associates were beginning to enforce some social closure on the economic and political power they had access to. But, because access to economic and political opportunities was still available to the masses, support for Thaksin's party remained fairly stable and strong: those in the rural areas appreciated his policies, while the middle class seemed satisfied with the actions taken in the handling of the uprising in the South and against alleged drug dealers at that time (Phongpaichit and Baker 2009).

It was acts of nepotism that signaled Thaksin's increasing monopolization of the political domain. With growing dominance and influence, backed by supporters in the military and the police, Thaksin began attacking his critics and gaining control of sections of the media. The extent of his power became further evident in the way he responded to criticisms, using state power unabashedly and treating his opponents with contempt (Hewison 2008; see also Case 2007). Not only was Thaksin monopolizing political power through his influence in the economy, but he was also hoarding alternative voices to his rule (see Chap. 12).

The support from the middle class began to decline when the low-income group was clearly benefitting more from the various populist policies designed and implemented by Thaksin. These include the famous 30 Baht universal healthcare, the one million village investment development funds, cheap loans, and other policies that were extremely popular with the electorate (McCargo 2002; see also Charoensin-o-larn 2009; Funston 2009). Having found that they gained nothing from these policies but were paying taxes to support them, the middle class became more alienated by these policies (Phongpaichit and Baker 2008b). In short, not only were they

beginning to be excluded from the political sphere, opportunities for them to voice their discontent were also dominated by Thaksin.

This control over political and economic policies not only restricted the access of resources and opportunities available to groups not within Thaksin's circle but was, arguably, also the source by which he secured the position of privilege at the expense of everyone else. Thaksin's "policy corruption," for instance, was clearly aimed at benefitting his personal concerns and those closest to him (Phongpaichit and Baker 2009; Montesano 2009c). Perhaps the most appropriate of examples is the sale of Shin Corporation immediately following the raising of the limit on foreign ownership of telecommunications firms from 25 to 49 % (Montesano 2009b). In essence, through his control over the state, media, and economy, Thaksin effectively limited the ability of key groups in Thai society from influencing politics and opposing him. His dominance over the economy, coupled by his power to change economic policies, kept the businessmen in check; his control of public space placed a limit on the extent by which independent media and intellectuals could question him or his policies; his authority in the state allowed him to control bureaucrats through both position and tradition (Phongpaichit and Baker 2008b). This thorough monopoly meant that in order for any groups – be it the capitalists, economic, or affective middle class – to obtain a share of the economic and political pie, usurpationary actions, such as social movements, were the best option available. In sum, Thaksin effectively enforced a social closure, alienating and excluding of groups in this social stratum.

Groups in the middle class were not the only ones to be excluded. Thaksin's tendency to appoint his cronies into seats of power meant that the old power group – "a network based around the palace, Prem, elements of the Democrat Party, members of prominent establishment families and senior bureaucrats" (Connors 2007: 252) – was slowly but surely being pushed to the periphery as well. This increasing monopolization of political and economic spheres by Thaksin and the resulting exclusion of the middle class, as well as other groups in Thai society, demonstrate clearly the conditions for mobilization through dissent.

5 Conclusion

The interplay of power among the key players in Thai politics remains deeply intertwined and demonstrates the dynamics of social closure through exclusion by those in power and social closure through usurpation by those marginalized as a consequence of this exclusion. Given the history of Thai politics, it is easy to view the 2006 coup as yet another instance of struggle within the military and the capitalists. However, in highlighting the heterogeneity within each class – such as the middle class which featured strongly in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s and the division of the military following Prem's rise to the premiership – this chapter suggests that Thai politics has more to do with struggle by groups in society trying to secure or improve their own advantages. To this end, democracy then becomes an ideological tool to legitimize the advancement of both these interests.

In short, this chapter has demonstrated how social closure is a relevant and useful analytical framework for the study of Thai politics for two reasons: first, its ability to incorporate both historical antecedents of political conflict in Thailand, as shown above. Second, in considering the dynamic struggle between forces of exclusion and monopolization on the one hand, and the forces of usurpation and opportunity hoarding on the other, as in the case of the PAD, the movement itself can be understood as a contemporary manifestation of class conflict and contestation in Thai society. More importantly, it allows for the inclusion of existing arguments of the movement being an intra-elite conflict precisely by showing that such conflicts are a result of groups contesting for power, resources, and opportunities. In other words, it explains contestations within and between social strata in society. With this in mind, studies on Thai politics are best appreciated not with a categorical understanding of class but with employing a paradigm that allows for both nuances and dynamism of class interests.

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