

# Political History of the Democracy Problem in Thailand from 1932 to the Present

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## **Abstract**

This paper aims to explore the politics and Thai democratic movement. Although Thailand became a democratic country more than 84 years ago (1932), the problems of participation, political conflicts, and political unconsciousness are still clearly seen today. The attempts to bring the top-down into bottom-up democracy became a new approach in the Thai Constitution (2007) and the new Thai Constitution (2016). The Political Development Council and Local Organization Council acts have been established to support people's active involvement. People's participation has also been launched throughout the country. Both the best practices and the drawbacks of people's politics in the political movement toward democracy will be examined in the paper.

**Keywords:** Political; History; Democracy

## Introduction

Thailand has a long history of attempts at democratization. Only in the 1980s and for a time after 1992 did it manage stable parliamentary rule. This stable parliamentary rule coincided with periods of elite consensus. In other periods of elite division, parliamentary rule has not survived. I will explore the relationship between elite consensus and parliamentary rule in Thailand and its impact on democratization. I will also examine the nature of elite divisions and the reasons such divisions have led to the breakdown of parliamentary government.

The history of Thailand from 1932 to 1973 was dominated by military dictatorships, which were in power for much of the period. The prominent personalities of the period were the dictator Luang Phibunsongkhram (better known as Phibun), who allied the country with Japan during the Second World War, and the civilian politician Pridi Phanomyong, who founded Thammasat University and was briefly prime minister after the war. A succession of military dictators followed Pridi's ouster-Phibun again, Sarit Dhanarajata, and Thanom Kittikachorn-under whom the traditional, authoritarian rule was combined with increasing modernization and Westernisation under the influence of the US. The end of the period was marked by Thanom's resignation, following a massacre of pro-democracy protesters led by Thammasat students (History of Thailand, 1932-1973).

## Internal conflict

The bloodless Siamese revolution of 1932, which transformed the government of Siam (as Thailand was then known) from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy, was a pivotal moment in Thailand's political history. King Prajadhipok initially accepted this change but later abdicated due to his strained relations with the government. His abdication, marked by a brief statement criticizing the regime, included phrases often quoted by critics of the slow pace of Siam's political development. This revolution and its aftermath set the stage for future political conflicts.

*“I am willing to surrender the powers I formerly exercised to the people as a whole, but I am not willing to turn them over to any individual or any group to use in an autocratic manner without heeding the voice of the people.”*

*(History of Thailand, 1932-1973)*

The new regime of 1932 was led by a group of colonels headed by Phraya Phahol Pholphayuhasena and Phraya Songsuradej. In December, they produced a constitution that first included a national assembly, half appointed and half indirectly elected. The people were promised that full democratic elections would be held once half the population had completed primary education, which was expected sometime in the 1940s. A prime minister and cabinet were appointed, and a facade of constitutional rule was maintained.

Once the new government had been established and the Constitution put into effect, conflict began to erupt among the members of the new ruling coalition. Four major factions competed for power: the older conservative civilian faction led by Phraya Manopakorn Nititada

(Mano); the senior military faction led by Phraya Phahol; the junior army and navy faction led by Luang Phibunsongkhram; and the young civilian faction led by Pridi Phanomyong.

The first serious conflict arose in 1933 when Pridi was tasked with drafting a new national economic plan. His radical program called for the nationalization of large tracts of farmland and rapid government-directed industrialization. It also called for the growth of higher education so that entry into the bureaucracy would not be entirely dominated by royalty and the aristocracy. However, most of the government factions immediately condemned the plan as communist.

Because it attacked private property, the members of the conservative clique were the ones most alarmed by Pridi's plan. They urged the Mano government to adopt policies that would reverse the course of the "revolution." However, when Phraya Mano attempted to do this, Phibun and Phraya Phahol launched a second coup that toppled the Mano government. Phraya Pahon was made the new prime minister, and his new government excluded all royalists.

A royalist reaction came in late 1933 when Prince Bovoradej, a grandson of Mongkut and one-time minister of defense, led an armed revolt against the government. He mobilized various provincial garrisons and marched on Bangkok, capturing the Don Muang Aerodrome.

The prince accused the government of disrespecting the king and promoting communism and demanded that the government leaders resign. He had hoped that some of the garrisons in the Bangkok area would join the revolt, but they remained loyal to the government. Meanwhile, the navy declared itself neutral and left for its bases in the south. After heavy fighting on the northern outskirts of Bangkok, the royalists were finally defeated, and Prince Bovoradej left for exile in French Indochina.

One effect of the repression of the insurrection was the diminution of the king's prestige. After the revolt started, King Prajadhipok declared in a telegram that he regretted the strife and civil disturbances. It is unclear whether he was motivated by a fear of being captured by rebels, being viewed as a supporter of the rebels, or a wish to avoid further choices between Phahol and Bovoradej. Either way, the fact remains that at the height of the conflict, the royal couple took refuge at Songkhla. The victorious party interpreted the king's withdrawal from the fighting scene as a sign that he had failed his duty. His credibility was undermined by refusing to support the legitimate government fully.

A few months later, in 1934, King Prajadhipok, whose relations with the new government had been deteriorating for some time, went abroad to receive medical treatment. While abroad, he carried on a correspondence with the government that discussed the terms under which he would continue to serve as a constitutional monarch. He requested the continuation of some traditional royal prerogatives. The government, however, would not agree. On March 2, 1935, the king announced his abdication. The government then chose Prince Ananda Mahidol, who was at that time in school in Switzerland, as the next king. For the first time, Siam was without a resident monarch and would remain so for fifteen years. This significant event profoundly impacted Thailand's political situation, leading to a period of uncertainty and power struggle.

In his abdication speech, Prajadhipok accused the government of having no regard for democratic principles, employing methods of administration incompatible with individual freedom and the principles of justice, ruling in an autocratic manner, and not letting the people have an authentic voice in Siam's affairs. In 1934, the Press Act came into effect, forbidding the publication of any material deemed detrimental to the public order or undermining morals. The law has been strictly enforced to the present day.

Reaction to the abdication was muted. Everybody was afraid of what might happen next. The government refrained from challenging any assertions in the king's abdication statement for fear of arousing further controversy. Opponents of the government kept quiet after the failure of the royalist rebellion.

Having defeated the royalists, the government was now put to the test of living up to the promises on which it had come to power. It took much more aggressive steps to carry out some important reforms. The currency went off the gold standard, allowing trade to recover. Expenditures on education were increased four-fold, thereby significantly raising the literacy rate. Elected local and provincial governments were introduced, and in November 1937, democratic development was brought forward when direct elections were held for the national assembly. However, political parties were still not allowed. Thammasat University was founded, at Pridi's initiative, as a more accessible alternative to the elitist Chulalongkorn University. Military expenditure was also greatly expanded, indicating the increasing military influence. Between 1934 and 1940, the Kingdom's army, navy, and air force were equipped as never before.

### **Military intervention**

Even if Thailand is a democratic country, myriad non-democratic realities are happening in the State. Twelve rebellions and eight coup d'états in 78 years of democracy are obvious evidence of political instability in Thailand. Interestingly, every rebellion and coup d'état was done with the military. For example, the leader of the first rebellion was Prince Baworndej, the royalty who had conservative ideas and yearned for absolute monarchy. Another fascinating point is that the military governments can undergo self-revolution to defend themselves from antagonists, such as Field Marshal Thanom Kittikajorn, who organized a self-revolution in 1971 to eradicate the general election and prolong the military junta government. Field Marshal Thanom was the Prime Minister for 10 years, from 1963 to 1973. (Rasmibhand, n.d.).

### **Political History of the Democratic Era**

Following the Siamese revolution of 1932, which imposed constitutional limits on the monarchy, the military and bureaucratic elite dominated Thai politics for around fifty years, with the support of business people and large-scale entrepreneurs. Government changes were affected primarily by a long series of mostly bloodless coups. (Yearis, n.d.).

Beginning with a brief experiment in democracy during the mid-1970s, civilian democratic political institutions slowly gained greater authority. This culminated in 1988 when Chatichai Choonhavan—leader of the Chart Thai Party (Thai Nation Party)—assumed office as the country's first democratically elected prime minister in over a decade. Three years later, another bloodless coup ended his term. (Absolute Astronomy, n.d.).

Shortly afterward, the royally appointed Mr. Anand Panyarachun, a businessman and former diplomat, headed a largely civilian interim government and promised to hold elections shortly. However, following inconclusive elections, former army commander General Suchinda Kraprayoon was appointed prime minister. Thais reacted to the appointment by demanding an end to military influence in government, but the military violently suppressed demonstrations in May 1992. According to eyewitness reports of the confrontation near the Democracy Monument in Bangkok, soldiers may have killed seven hundred and fifty protesters after only two days of protests. (Fun Easy English, n.d.).

Domestic and international reactions to the violence forced Suchinda to resign, and the nation once again turned to Anand, who was appointed interim prime minister until new elections were held in September 1992. In the September 1992 elections, political parties that had opposed the military won in May 1992 by a narrow majority. Mr. Chuan Leekpai, a leader of the Democrat Party, became prime minister at the head of a five-party coalition.

Following the defection of a coalition partner, Chuan dissolved Parliament in May 1995, and the Chart Thai Party won the most significant number of parliamentary seats in the subsequent election. Party leader Banharn Silpa-archa became Prime Minister but held the office for over a year. Following elections held in November 1996, General Chavalit Youngchaiyudh formed a coalition government and became Prime Minister. However, the onset of the Asian financial crisis caused a loss of confidence in the Chavalit government and forced him to hand over power to Chuan Leekpai in November 1997.

### **2006 coup**

While Thaksin was in New York City to make a speech at UN Headquarters, there was a conspiracy to create a violent clash to end the month-long PAD protest brutally. Just in time to prevent the alleged clash, the military seized power on September 19, 2006. (Absolute Astronomy, n.d.)

The Council for Democratic Reform under Constitutional Monarchy (CDRM), led by General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, was formed. After the September 19, 2006 coup, the junta banned political activities. The 1997 Constitution was abrogated, although most government institutions remained intact. A new constitution was drafted and promulgated in late 2007.

A month after the coup, an interim civilian government was formed, including an appointed House of Representatives from various professions and an appointed Constitutional Court. Freedom of speech was restored.

### **2008 Political Crisis**

In 2008, Thailand saw increasing political turmoil, with the PPP government facing pressure to step down amid mounting civil disobedience and unrest led by the PAD. The conflict centered on the Constitution. The PPP supported the amendment of the 2007 constitution, while anti-government protesters considered it a political amnesty that Thaksin and his followers predicted previously. The anti-government protesters were mainly better educated and more affluent, and urban Thais criticized a Western-style electoral system corrupted by rich politicians. Thaksin was accused of exploiting votes, bureaucrats, policemen, military officers, and even political factions. Thaksin became the example of the businessman

autocrat, launching so-called populist projects, some of which were controversial, such as the War on Drugs. They said the police noted hundreds of killings and murder cases to be merely fighting among the drug traffickers, but no further investigation ever occurred. The judicial process was seen as useless; instead, decisive justice was seen to be in the hands of the police. (Yearis, n.d.).

### **2009-2010 Protests and Crackdowns**

Abhisit's rise to power was controversial and opposed from the beginning. In April 2009, anti-government protesters, known as 'The Red Shirts,' began their massive demonstration aiming at the prime minister's resignation and fresh elections. The primary site of the demonstration was in Bangkok. From April 8, the demonstrators spread their activities to significant locations such as main intersections. The streets were also blocked and barricaded. The demonstration occurred at the same time as the ASEAN summit in Pattaya. The demonstrators also moved to protest, aiming at barring the summit. Eventually, a handful of protesters stormed the hotel and the summit site, causing the summit's cancellation. (Absolute Astronomy, n.d.)

### **Resolution to Conflict**

On May 3, the Thai Prime Minister announced he was willing to hold elections on November 14 if the opposition *red shirts* accepted the offer. The following day, *red-shirt* leaders accepted the proposal to leave the occupied parts of Bangkok in return for an election on the scheduled date.

However, one week later, on May 10, protesters had yet to disband despite accepting the 'road map' proposed by the prime minister for the early 2010 November elections. They placed new demands upon the prime minister that Deputy Prime Minister Suthep Thaugsuban, who was in charge of security operations on the clash of April 10, must first turn himself in for prosecution before they willingly disperse.

On May 11, Suthep presented himself to the Department of Special Investigation. However, The red-shirt p, protesters, s were not satisfied and demanded that Suthep be formally charged instead by police. The red shirts' failure to disperse was taken as a decline of the conciliatory 'road map,' and Prime Minister Abhisit's proposal of early parliamentary elections was withdrawn. This was followed by a warning issued from the prime minister that protesters must disperse or face imminent military action. Furthermore, the 'red shirts' led another protest on May 19. The army killed over 90 protesters, and thousands were injured in the subsequent military crackdown. Army tactics have been heavily criticized for failing to abide by international standards and using lethal force on unarmed protesters. At least six people, including nurses and medics, were shot by snipers inside a Buddhist temple set up as a safe area.

According to official statistics, between 2001 and 2011, Isaan's Gross Domestic Product per capita more than doubled to \$1,475. Over the same period, GDP in the Bangkok area soared from \$7,900 to nearly \$13,000. (Baker, 2015)

### **2013 Political Crisis**

Following the announcement of a proposed amnesty bill by the Yingluck government in October 2013, protests resurfaced. The bill would allow former Prime Minister Thaksin to



re-enter Thailand, and the protest movement regards the Yingluck administration as corrupt and illegitimate and perceives Yingluck as a proxy for her brother. The protest movement is led by SuthepThaugsuban and supported by the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC).

Prime Minister Yingluck dissolved the Thai parliament following the recommencement of protests and announced a new election by the Thai Constitution. The Constitution states that elections must be held 45 to 60 days after parliament is dissolved. The protest movement opposed the election announcement, and the PDRC stated that it would boycott the process, with Suthep calling for an unelected council to lead the country until reforms can be implemented. Protesters marched to the Thai-Japanese sports stadium, the venue of the registration process, on December 22, 2013, to block the election commission's work. Protesters at the Thai-Japanese sports stadium clashed with police on December 26, 2013, resulting in two fatalities (one police officer was killed by a live bullet fired by a protester). Protesters armed themselves with sling shots and wore gas masks to fight with police, and around 200 people were injured overall. Due to the escalation in violence, the election commission released a statement urging the government to consider postponing the elections. The government explained that it cannot change the election date but remains open to discussions with protesters. In his response to the media on December 27, 2013, Thailand's army chief, General Prayuth Chan-Ocha, did not rule out the possibility of another military coup (11 military coups have been successful in Thai history), stating: "Whether it is going to happen, time will tell. We do not want to overstep the bounds of our authority. We do not want to use force. We try to use peaceful means, such as talks and meetings, to solve the problem." During the same period, authorities who cited insurrection issued an arrest warrant for Suthep. (HaqCheck, 2022), However, police have not acted on the order for fear of further disruption.

### **Politics of Thailand**

Until May 22, 2014, Thailand's politics were conducted within the framework of a constitutional monarchy, whereby the Prime Minister is the head of government and a hereditary monarch is the head of State. The judiciary is independent of the executive and legislative branches. (BlahFace, n.d.).

Since the coup d'état of May 22, 2014, the 2007 Constitution was revoked. Thailand has been under the rule of the military organization National Council for Peace and Order, which has taken control of the national administration. The Chief of the NCPO abolished the National Assembly and assumed all responsibility of the legislative branch. Under martial law enforced throughout the Kingdom, the military courts have been responsible for some cases typically performed by civilian courts. (Thabchumpon, 2016) However, the court system, including the Constitutional Court, exists even without the Constitution.

### **Conclusion**

Since the fall of the absolute monarchy in 1932, Thai political history can be divided into five periods: 1932-73, 1973-76, 1976-91, 1991-92, and 1992 to the present. Although the process of change has been uneven and discontinuous, the overall trends have been toward a

declining political role for the military, a correspondingly more important place for parliament in the political process, growing identification of political parties with particular regions and constituencies along with continued party-system fragmentation and a lack of differentiation among party platforms, and an increasingly well developed and assertive civil society. (LoGerfo & King, 1996)

Pornchai Rasmibaedya asked why they failed to solve those. There is only one reason. They have never spoken the truth together or told all the details relevant to the truth. They seem to be careful and worry much about their survival. However, it is not their mistake. Because the only kind of creature on earth that can tell a lie is human. Scientists have discovered that some human brain areas respond to lying behavior. However, no one thought to remove it to stop lying to each other. They may be afraid of harmful effects. Because It may have a function of supporting the struggle for survival, staying together very closely, or being linked together interdependent, we cannot cut it off. Therefore, the Thai political crisis cannot end by using military force to stop the rally or commit a military coup, which is expected to happen again. However, speaking the truth to each other is needed, although it is against nature to say it. Speak it out loud and disclose the real causes of injustice and that this country is not a democracy.

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