



DEMOC RATIC FRAGI LITY

The Vicious Cycle of Thai Politics

Sirasart Sukcharoensin

WITH A FOREWORD BY FORMER PRIME MINISTER ABHISIT VEEJAJIVA

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*“Democracy, as established by
the leaders of the 24 June 1932 Revolution,
was meant for all Thai people, not for any one group.
Therefore, when I am gone, let all Thai people preserve it, and
never let any group seize and misuse it.”*

*— Phraya Phahonphonphayuhasena,
leading figure in the 1932 Siamese Revolution and Prime Minister of Siam¹*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I remember a defining moment which represents well my long, deep interest in Thai politics. I was sitting in a barbershop getting my hair cut. It was just another night in Bangkok. As always, the barber had turned on the TV, on it the evening news. That night's story was one of a murder. Chaimet Sitsanitphong, provincial politician, shot over a political conflict, an act of election-related violence. What stood out to me that night, however, was not the news story itself. It was the reaction of my barber. She, who was seemingly half-heartedly listening in on the broadcast, said something along the lines of: "Politics, right?" I didn't say anything back, merely a sound conveying some sort of affirmation, and she went back to cutting my hair. Her response that night, I later discovered, sufficiently embodied the attitude of a large number of other people. It was then I realised how salient the issue of democracy was in Thailand. We, a people privileged enough to live under the banner of a 'democratic' system, had grown so accustomed to electoral violence that we had effectively normalised it as part of the political process. That one defining moment, combined with hundreds of others like it, convinced me that the writing of this book was necessary. For it is only when we acknowledge our problems, analyse their roots, and visualise the patterns of our past that we can begin the process of finding a solution. Believe me, I do not know the answers, I will not propose solutions. What this book ultimately aims to do is to highlight the cyclical problems of our past and in our present.

The cycle of Thai politics proposed in this book is one which bases a significant amount of its key ideas on other existing cycles, such as Chai-anan Samutwanit's 'vicious cycle' or Rawin Leelapa-

tana's comparison of Thai politics with the Buddhist concept of *samsara*. The framework presented here should therefore be understood as an attempt to examine these recurring patterns through a broader historical and analytical framework. The categories and subcategories used throughout the book should similarly be read in context. Subcategories, for example *Violence and Intimidation*, under *Elections*, do not suggest that these problems were equally prevalent across generations, or that they occurred in every period. Rather, they should be understood as a 'part of a whole', contributing to a larger pattern within a broader category, in this case, flawed elections. Likewise, practices such as gerrymandering cannot be generalised as recurrent and repeating features of Thai politics; when present, however, they form part of the broader category of election interference. There are also, throughout Thai history, periods of governance uninterrupted by coups d'état, 1992 to 2006, for example. And, though other forms of democratic backsliding may take place during these periods, the cycle should be read as a broad general trend, and not as a solid unchanging pattern. The recurrence of a pattern does not require that every component of that pattern appear in every period. Lastly, throughout the book, I occasionally write with causal statements, such as 'X led to lowered public trust'. These claims are often based on polling, public records, news, and on-the-ground sentiment, as well as being backed up by general political theory. Such statements, then, should be understood as analytical conclusions drawn from available evidence and political thought.

FOREWORD

It has long been said that Thai democracy is trapped in a vicious cycle. Throughout its almost one hundred years of history, there seems to have been endless repetitions of constitution drafting, flawed elections, abuse of power, protests, and coups d'état. Even today, debates continue about the drafting of yet another constitution amidst dissatisfaction with the current system, with its perceived failures to produce a clean and efficient government that can deliver what the electorate wants.

Democratic Fragility looks back at this history of cycles, analysing each phase to identify the factors that lead to the next phase in the flawed system. Beginning with elections characterised by vote buying, populism, occasional boycotts, gerrymandering, and interference as sources of dysfunctional parliaments and governments, the ensuing corruption, abuse of power, and crises in some form lead to disillusionment and often anger and protests, eventually creating an impasse that allows coups d'état to take place. Yet coups d'état never succeed in fixing the problems they claim would be solved. Instead, the constitutions they create set off another round of this flawed process.

Sirasart Sukcharoensin goes into detail on many instances of these phases to gain insights into the process. While many may not totally agree with the analyses presented here, there is no doubt that the points they raise are clearly relevant and important for understanding the problems Thai politics has faced for so long up to now. And while solutions are not offered here, such an understanding is a valuable starting point for all of us to tackle these ills and do our part to finally break the cycle.

Former Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva

INTRODUCTION

In the early morning, standing on top of a military truck, a revolutionary group known as the Khana Ratsadon, composed of educated civilian and military elites, declared the end of Siam's centuries-long absolute monarchy and, as they proclaimed, the beginning of democracy in the nation. One of its leading figures, Phraya Phahonphonphayuhasena, read from the Khana Ratsadon Manifesto. The manifesto, aside from proclaiming a new form of government in Siam, outlined several key principles for the new state: independence, economic well-being, public order, education, liberty, and equality. Most importantly, it declared that the supreme power of governance ultimately belonged to the citizens of Siam. The Siamese revolution of 1932, a bloodless coup d'état, transitioned the country into a constitutional monarchy. In doing so, it formally placed sovereignty in the hands of the people, setting the foundation for a new political order. The revolution, led by reformist visionaries who strived for a more representative form of government, marked a decisive shift in the basis of political authority, from absolute rule toward government exercised through representative institutions. The revolution was over, and what had begun was democracy in Siam.

Under the 1932 Temporary Charter (a placeholder for a constitution), the interim legislature, composed of 70 Khana Ratsadon-appointed members, convened to elect Phraya Manopakorn Nitithada as prime minister, then-referred to as the president of the People's Committee of Siam. Manopakorn, seen as a central and neutral figure, was elected on the heavy recommendation of the Khana Ratsadon, meant to appease old royalist factions and facilitate the transition into constitutional monarchy. Soon after,

the promulgation of the permanent 1932 Constitution instituted several key democratic frameworks which made up the three branches of government. A House of Representatives was established, along with an independent judicial system and a Supreme Court, and the People's Committee of Siam became the executive Council of Ministers. And though the Constitution also established transitional provisions, such as the House being half-elected and half-appointed, its provisions detailed a foundation for representative democracy, which now could pave the way for governance.

Early democratic governance, however, would prove immediately tumultuous for the revolutionaries. Lingering divides between the reformist Khana Ratsadon and the old royalist factions led to intense conflict. Ultimately, the ideological separation was exacerbated by the proposed economic plan drafted by Pridi Banomyong, the Khana Ratsadon's civilian leader. The plan, which stipulated the nationalisation of land, government-led industrialisation, and welfare measures, was condemned as communist, and Pridi was accused of wanting to lead a social revolution. Highly controversial, it immensely escalated tensions within the legislature, becoming a subject of great debate, with weapons being reportedly brought into the House. In addition, intimidation and threats were levied against Pridi, with armed protestors surrounding his house after his absence in debate. Under pressure and facing criticism from the royalist faction, Manopakorn subsequently dissolved the House, surrounding the building with military troops and forcing its closure. Furthermore, through emergency decrees, he suspended parts of the constitution, which encompassed provisions regarding the legislature and judiciary. The following day, Manopakorn issued the Anti-Communist Act, which disbanded the Khana Ratsadon and allowed for the arrest of alleged communists without trial, resulting in the exile of Pridi. Manopakorn's actions, collectively, would be-

come known as the April 1933 coup d'état.¹ Less than a year after its transition into democracy, Siam's first prime minister would move to suspend its newly-promulgated constitution, in doing so paralysing the legislature and undermining its judiciary, which concentrated power in the executive and allowed him to govern through emergency powers. Although branded as a temporary response to the ongoing political conflict, the April 1933 coup d'état established a precedent of extra-systemic intervention, utilising unconstitutional measures to resolve political turmoil instead of doing so through the democratic system. Moreover, just two months after Manopakorn's coup d'état, revolutionary leader Phraya Phahonphonphayuhasena, who had first declared Siam's change in government, launched a counter-coup d'état against the Manopakorn government, citing Manopakorn's authoritarian tendencies and installing himself as prime minister. This marked the country's first military coup d'état.

The events in 1933 spoke to the nascence of Thai democracy, which, though established, was not yet consolidated and its norms not yet institutionalised. Though constitutions, elections, and representative bodies had been created, the norms necessary to sustain them had yet to take root. Yet the instability and turmoil seen in 1933 did not eventually end as Thailand transitioned into its new political system. Instead, the events of 1933 established patterns of political behaviour that would repeatedly re-emerge, shaping most of modern Thai politics. These patterns are visible in Thailand's post-1932 political history, which has been marked by 13 successful coups d'état, 9 failed coups d'état, and 20 different constitutions, alongside persistent political instability. Even when democratic reform is implemented, it has proven to be short-lived, with periods of democratisation often offset by military coups d'état. As individual and isolated as each instance of democratic backsliding may seem, however, they are better understood as components of a larger,

recurring cycle. Through patterns of flawed elections, tumultuous governance, military coups d'état, and rewritten constitutions, Thai democracy has been actively eroded by a self-reinforcing cycle, in which each instance of democratic backsliding both results from and contributes to the next. In this, rather than overcoming the political dynamics of 1933, Thailand has repeatedly reproduced them, preventing the consolidation of democracy and leaving the country vulnerable to polarisation, authoritarianism, and tyranny. As a result, Thailand has experienced a prolonged period of democratic fragility.

It is, therefore, a recurring cycle that sustains democratic fragility in Thailand. Political interference in electoral processes and outcomes makes it so elections, while formally democratic, are marked by uneven competition and unfree circumstances. These elections frequently produce governments that are unrepresentative and often lack legitimacy. This, in turn, creates conditions in which governance is increasingly characterised by chaos, corruption, and crisis (*CCC*). As instability escalates, public trust in government and democratic institutions declines. The perceived failures of the democratic system, manifested in flawed elections and tumultuous governance, are then utilised as justification for a military coup d'état, which is presented as necessary to correct *CCC* and restore democracy. Following this, the military often rewrites the constitution, embedding mechanisms that entrench military influence in Thai politics. The resulting constitutional framework then paves the way for new elections and governance under inherent constraints, thus starting the cycle again. The four chapters that follow (Elections, *CCC*, Coup d'état, and Constitution) describe mechanisms and practices within each stage that harm democracy. More importantly, they demonstrate how each stage both results from and contributes to the next, perpetuating the cycle. This book

argues that Thailand's enduring democratic fragility cannot be fully understood by examining elections, tumultuous governance, coups d'état, or constitutions alone, nor can it be understood through separate analyses of individual episodes of political instability. Rather, democratic fragility must be understood as part of a larger recurring and mutually-reinforcing process that has repeatedly undermined democratic consolidation.

ELECTIONS

ELECTIONS AS THE FIRST PHASE

Elections act as one of the best insights into the strength of a nation's democracy. Free and fair elections can bring about trust and belief in electoral processes, which fosters political participation, boosts turnout, and provides real choices for a wide political spectrum. And, as a result, true representatives of the people are fairly elected into office to carry out the people's will. But most importantly, at its core, elections must function as a litmus test for politicians. They should allow people to hold representatives accountable for actions taken in office and, in turn, vote them out when necessary. This important safeguard ensures only candidates representative of the people get into office.¹ However, when interference within the electoral process hampers these key aspects of democratic elections, elections can become mere tools for political incumbents or those willing to break democratic rules. Instead of rewarding representation, accountability, and sovereignty, elections turn into contests of control, power, and rule-breaking. When the electoral process is undermined or manipulated, democracy itself is weakened. Elections, once a valuable measure of democracy, then become mere political legitimations of undemocratic action. This idea of legitimising undemocratic action becomes especially apparent when looking back over Thai history, in which patterns of rule- and norm-breaking for electoral gain are commonplace. Actions, undertaken by politicians, work to distort the people's will and eliminate the fair playing field. There are two main types of undemocratic action that politicians employ in an election. Some practices like electoral fraud, the usage violence and voter intimidation and vote buying are visibly undemocratic, as they involve direct interference within the electoral process. However, some actions taken by politicians may appear completely within the rules

of, and often have no immediate consequence for, democracy. But, these actions, election boycotts, gerrymandering, and populism, are just as harmful. Through both direct and indirect interference, politicians subvert the electoral process, reducing public trust in elections and producing unrepresentative government, ultimately resulting in public disillusionment with the democratic system as a whole. Consequently, flawed elections pave the way for tumultuous governance and serve as justification of extra-systemic intervention.

DIRECT INTERFERENCE

Sometimes the undemocratic actions taken to influence electoral processes are obvious. Direct interference, employed by willing politicians to rig elections, is usually illegal, visible, and straight-forward. The practices of electoral fraud, vote buying, violence, and intimidation are regularly utilised as mere electoral tools. However, they directly interfere in the processes of campaigning, voting, and counting votes, corrupting electoral processes. Direct interference undermines the spirit of free and fair competition, distorting representation, and therefore negatively impacting the democratic legitimacy of the subsequent government and the system as a whole. Because they are so visible, direct practices undertaken by politicians significantly contribute to public disillusionment with democracy, ultimately illustrating the flaws of Thai elections.

ELECTORAL FRAUD

Electoral fraud spans a wide variety of undemocratic actions. What unites all forms of electoral fraud, however, is that they are illegal, and are usually subject to specific election laws. In this, electoral fraud encompasses instances of direct interference in the voting process, vote counting, or election administration. The most common forms of electoral fraud include ballot stuffing, tampering with vote counts, destroying or hiding ballots, and manipulating voter records, among others.² Of course, electoral fraud is undemocratic: these practices work to actively subvert the outcomes of elections. It is a combination of multiple forms of electoral fraud, however, which most significantly distort the people's will and directly undermine any pretence of free and fair elections, and a particular form of electoral fraud is most commonly employed in combination with others. Still, electoral fraud is one of the most prevalent forms of direct interference, its utilisation widespread and at every level of democratic politics. As a result, electoral fraud works to actively decrease public trust in democracy, displaying the corruptible nature of elections and the politicians who are willing to employ its practices.

One of the clearest cases of electoral fraud is seen in the 1957 February election, often dubbed one of the 'dirtiest elections in Thai history'. The election marked a test for the lingering political power of coup d'état leader and prime minister, Plaek Phibunsongkhram, a key figure who had led Thailand through the events of the Second World War and, once again, had come to power through the 1948 military coup d'état. Following his first premiership, in which he effectively governed under a military dictatorship, Phibun expressed intentions to 'democratise'. His past authoritarian tendencies, however, worked to undermine his new purported goal: they had

fostered an environment of instability during his premiership (full of attempted coups d'état) and caused immense political fractures within his government and in the larger political landscape. For example, the Pridi Banomyong-aligned Free Thai Movement (which directly opposed Phibun's actions in the war) acted as political opposition, while Phibun's own 'coup group', which had propelled him back into office, started to exert increased influence over the premier whilst simultaneously positioning themselves away from him. As political pressure mounted, Phibun, seeking to draw a veneer of democratic legitimacy, consolidate power, and extend his term, called the 1957 election. However, somewhat paradoxically, an election meant to convey Phibun's transition away from authoritarian governance into democracy, featured, arguably, the worst electoral interference of his time in governance. Through actions taken directly by Phibun and his administration, the 1957 election was rigged in favour of the incumbent Seri Manangkhasila Party, and highlighted the practices of direct interference in Thai elections.³

Phibun's direct interference in the 1957 election started before the voting process again. Several instances of voter list tampering were widely reported, such as the irregular additions of names, which potentially facilitated the casting of fraudulent, pro-government ballots. In addition, some lists added voters late or not at all, seen as part of a larger initiative to suppress opposition votes. By selectively determining voter lists, the Seri Manangkhasila Party worked to falsely increase Phibun's vote share and subvert the people's will. Furthermore, some polling stations were allowed to remain open after the voting time had ended, while some opened late, deliberately allowing the government strategic control of the voting process to ensure an unfair advantage for the incumbent party. During the actual voting and vote counting process, the

government employed a variety of different undemocratic actions. For one, fraudulent ballots, known as ‘fire cards’, which had the government-party candidate’s number pre-marked, were stuffed into ballots and counted as valid votes. This process, supervised by government paratroopers, also included the counting of spoiled ballots containing votes for Seri Manangkhasila candidates as good ballots, while ballots that voted for other numbers were left as spoiled ballots. Additionally, many irregularities with polling units were recorded. For example, a polling unit in Lumpini Park experienced a power outage during the vote counting process, wherein counting had to be stopped. When the power was restored and the process continued, it appeared that the number of votes counted was greater than the total number of people who were registered to vote at Lumpini Park, a great number of those votes being in favour of the government. Similar issues surrounding polling stations were the distance between the ballot collection point and the station (allowing for the possibility of vote tampering and alleged switching of ballot boxes) and the delay in vote counting, with some units taking as long as a week. And, stations which took longer to count votes saw a reported, significant increase in government votes during the delay. After the announcement of the election results, in which the Seri Manangkhasila Party won by a landslide, mass public protest, encompassing members of the general public and university students, resulted in a declaration of a state of emergency. Following negotiations between protestors and government, and in response to various accusations of electoral fraud, Phibun ultimately admitted to the unfair nature of the election and promised to hold a new election, effectively annulling the election.

The 1957 February election is one of the clearest cases of direct interference in an election and exemplifies its subsequent consequences for democracy. Phibun, and the incumbent Seri

Manangkhasila Party, utilised various ways to disrupt the voting and vote counting process, in an attempt to tilt the election in favour of the government. These actions blatantly distorted the will of the people, thereby lowering trust in the election's processes and results, and also in the democratic process. Ultimately, as was with the case in 1957, public disillusionment with the electoral process, a consequence of intense electoral fraud, prompted condemnation and backlash against Phibun and his government, which then culminated in the 1957 coup d'état. Electoral fraud, visibly undemocratic and wrong, laid groundwork for turmoil.

VIOLENCE AND INTIMIDATION

Unlike electoral fraud, violence and intimidation often break laws unrelated to elections. Similarly, however, they are visibly undemocratic measures undertaken by politicians. Though prevalent everywhere, the practices are most common in local and provincial elections, especially in poorer and more rural areas of Thailand. Out of the two, violence is easier to recognise, typically employed in the form of attacks and attempted assassinations of politicians and political candidates. But, electoral violence can also encompass, though rarer, violence at or near the ballot box, meant to forcibly sway an individual voter's vote. Intimidation, similarly, can appear in many forms. For one, it is often used against voters, whether that be in the form of coercion, threats, or pressure. It may also include the use of local power dynamics or the presence of armed forces at voting booths. Unlike violence, intimidation may not always be illegal, and is not commonly applied against politicians themselves. Still, both violence and intimidation are utilised to suppress the people's will through reducing turnout, creating an environment of fear, and eliminating voter choice, contributing to

a larger discontentment with elections.

The pattern of the utilisation of violence in elections traces back to the roots of Thai democracy. For example, during the 1946 August election, around a decade after the Siamese revolution, reported instances of violence were widespread, the most notable being the bombing of MP candidate Thaing Suwannathat during a campaign rally. Thaing, a local Democrat party leader, was waiting for then-deputy party leader Seni Pramoj to wrap up his speech when a bomb was thrown at him. The MP candidate survived the incident, but he was permanently injured and his right leg was amputated. The bombing of Thaing remains one of the earliest examples of direct violence used against a political candidate, and the bombing, politically motivated, which not only hindered the democratic process by almost killing a political candidate but also set up an environment of fear, a display of the effects of violence in elections. However, even though Thaing survived and, later, won his seat, the attack still undermined the electoral process by hampering Thaing's chances at victory and set a future environment of hostility towards, and a future pattern of using violence against, political candidates. Reflecting the entrenched usage of violence in the Thai electoral and political process, in the 1980s, General Prem Tinsulanonda, during his tenure as prime minister, survived at least four separate assassination attempts, the most infamous of which involved a rocket-propelled grenade fired at his motorcade. More recently, national cases like the attempted assassination of Prachachat-MP Kamolsak Leewamoh in 2026, where gunmen armed with heavy weaponry opened fire, display the lingering usage of violence in national-level politics and elections. Violence, however, is notably more common in local elections, with reported cases of electoral violence usually set in provincial or district-level contexts, such as elections for Provincial Administrative Organisations

(PAOs) or Subdistrict Administrative Organisations (SAOs). For example, the 2024 murder of Chaimet Sitsanitphong, a provincial politician from Prachin Buri, demonstrated the prevalence of electoral violence on local levels. Chaimet, who was shot repeatedly, by PAO mayor and adoptive father Soonthorn Vilawan after a heated argument surrounding the upcoming 2025 PAO election, represented a recent, widely-reported instance of local electoral violence. Several other reported instances in the 2020s surrounding the assassinations of mayoral SAO candidates in Pattani, Songkhla, and Loei, illustrate the continued prevalence of violence against political candidates in elections. Historically, violence has been employed against political candidates in a visible effort to illegally and undemocratically influence the results of an election.

Violence against voters, however, is rarer, and often appears in combination with voter intimidation. For example, in the 1948 elections, held after the 1947 coup d'état, rumours of bomb-throwing were spread in populous districts and areas. In this, violence and intimidation appeared in the form of physical threats. The 1948 election would, subsequently, garner a turnout of less than 30%, one of the lowest in Thai history, representing the impact of violence and intimidation on turnout and political participation and its ability to distort the electorate. The clearest case of intimidation (through threat of violence) is seen in the aforementioned 1957 election, where government-backed gangsters and thugs utilised intimidation techniques, like the utilisation of violence and smeared feces on doors to force villagers to vote for pro-government candidates. Furthermore, these thugs also directly disrupted polling stations, in at least one case knocking out poll workers, and armed troops were centred at some polling stations. Intimidation, in the cases of 1948 and 1957, was used to create an environment of fear surrounding the elections, thereby suppressing the vote through

coercion and reducing turnout. In this, intimidation against voters becomes a powerful electoral technique for politicians willing to break the rules.⁴

Violence and intimidation, whether leveraged against politicians or civilians, always harms democracy: it significantly alters the playing field, creating an unfair electoral environment and diluting the will of the people through coercion, fearmongering, and elimination of competition. As a result, electoral results are no longer representations of the people's will but merely serve to reward those willing to engage in violence and intimidation for political gain. Though the practices are sometimes illegal, they are still prevalent, and work to actively undermine public confidence in elections and weaken the legitimacy of the democratic system itself.

VOTE BUYING

The 1995 general election is often regarded as having one of the highest levels of vote buying in Thai history, with numerous reported vote-buying operations and an estimated tens of billions of baht spent to influence the election. For example, a police raid on several shophouses in Buriram revealed a clear, thought-out operation designed to undermine and rig an election. The canvassers, linked to Thai Nation Party “godfather” Newin Chidchob, were found with several thousand campaign slips filled with pictures, names and numbers linked to candidates within the Buriram area, along with cash stapled together with *how to vote* cards.⁵ Authorities, in total, allegedly found around 11.4 million baht in small bank notes. But the vote buying discovered by the police raid in the Buriram province wasn't the sole instance of electoral fraud in the 1995 election. Though electoral fraud was widely reported

nationally in 1995, a significant number of reports and alleged fraud stems from the Northeast, which saw the establishment of detailed, systematic operations of vote buying. Citizens, for one, were often divided by the campaigns into categories: those with a high level of social standing or education would mostly receive meals and drinks in the pre-election season in order to gain their support, while those with a lower social standing and lower educational level would receive immediate material reward, such as cash, animals, or other commodities. Furthermore, a cash amount was used to estimate the buying of votes. Reflecting the prevalence of vote buying in the 1995 election, it is said that the price of a vote had gone up in the Northeast, from 50-100 baht for an individual vote to around 200-700 baht. An entire household of voters could be bought for as much as 3,000 baht, and a village was said to possibly have been bought for 100,000 to 200,000 baht. And, though the permissible amount of campaign spending per candidate was capped at one million, in a competitive northeastern constituency, candidates are said to have needed to spend around 20 million baht to win. Political parties, in ways other than direct cash payments, also attempted other methods to buy votes. For one, parties would pay a small fee to a villager in return for having the party's campaign poster on their house. Though not directly vote buying, this set up a system of rewarding behaviour advantageous to a political party with a monetary reward and set up a precursor and foundation for direct payments in the future. Other forms of indirect vote buying included the donation of a massive amount of money to organisations such as youth clubs, community groups, and temples in order to earn an endorsement or additional votes. These forms of vote buying are usually entrenched within local political networks, framed as acts of philanthropy.

The numerous instances of vote buying in the 1995 election illustrated the systematic, entrenched nature of the practice in Thai politics. Vote buying, because it distorts representation, is undemocratic. Instead of voting on policy or merit, influenced citizens choose their candidate in return for receiving a monetary or material reward. The results of the election and the candidate that wins, as a result, are not representations of the people's will but instead a representation of which candidate was willing to spend the most money to win. It effectively forces an unfair electoral field, creating transactional relationships between candidates and voters and electing unrepresentative candidates, distorting the people's will. A candidate which wins an election through the process of vote buying is not indebted to the people, because they do not owe their constituents any campaign promises. Therefore, in office, they are free in ideology, voting, and policy. Overarchingly, however, vote buying delegitimises elected government and reduces trust in democracy. When numerous cases of vote buying are reported, and therein elections are result of undemocratic interference, the public loses trust in the electoral process. Elections no longer fulfil their purpose, and the politicians voted in are perceived as illegitimate. In addition, repeated patterns and the continued prevalence of vote buying further entrench it in Thai politics, normalising it as part of the political system, thereby also reducing trust in the democratic system as a whole.

Instances of direct interference are easy to spot in Thai elections. They are visible, often illegal actions taken to directly influence and change electoral results. Through practices like engaging in electoral fraud, the usage of violence and intimidation against voters and political candidates, and the practice of vote buying, politicians make the electoral field unfree and unfair, in

it, distorting the people's will. Direct interference, then, rewards those willing to undertake undemocratic action, turning elections into unrepresentative contests rather than genuine reflections of the electorate. And, unlike the practices discussed in *Indirect Interference*, the actions of direct interference are clearly undemocratic, making it so their prevalence directly corresponds with a decrease in public trust in elections and growing disillusionment with the democratic system.

INDIRECT INTERFERENCE

Some actions taken by politicians, however, are not so easy to spot. These actions often are legal, they exist and operate within the system, and they often have an inarguable basis. However, they are just as, if not more, dangerous to Thai democracy. Indirect interference, practices which are justifiable on legal grounds and do not break any explicit rules, includes a wide variety of actions which make the electoral field unfair and unfree: election boycotts, gerrymandering, and populism. These actions, though taken within the law, can still undermine democracy and free and fair elections by eroding norms and decreasing trust in the electoral process. This is what makes indirect interference so dangerous. No explicit rules are broken, and every practice and decision seems to have a legal basis. This makes indirect interference, often, a favourite tool of desperate incumbents. They make elections, no longer reflections of the people's will, mere façades for the continuation of the ruling party's power. So, when analysing the problems surrounding Thai elections, it is important to address indirect interference, its many forms, and why it is so harmful to democracy.

GERRYMANDERING

Gerrymandering refers to the deliberate manipulation of the boundaries of an electoral constituency to favour a certain party or candidate. It may condense certain like-minded voters, making sure they win drastically in a few districts and lose in most others, while it may also spread these voters apart to minimise their influence or electoral power. Though redistricting is fundamentally based on population, gerrymandering allows politicians to produce electoral maps beneficial to certain political parties, usually the incumbent's. The process of redrawing maps, issued by the Election Commission, maintains an outward appearance of democratic legitimacy. In theory, the system should be able to adapt to growing populations and urbanisation through redrawing voter districts. However, the Election Commission has been historically linked to the military (addressed more in *Constitution*), and its decisions, especially surrounding redistricting and the redrawing of electoral maps, have often favoured the military or military-aligned parties.

One of the clearest examples of gerrymandering can be seen in the 2019 election, held under the junta-promulgated 2017 Constitution, which changed the number of constituency seats in the House from 400 to 350 and therefore required the Election Commission to redraw maps accordingly. However, right before the Commission was to release the completed electoral maps, Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha, who had led the 2014 coup d'état which brought the military to power, used a constitutional provision to push back the announcement's deadline. In addition, the ruling junta, the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), also issued an order legalising any Election Commission decision in redistricting, even ones which go against existing laws. These acts, undertaken by Prayut, paved the way for the undemo-

cratic redrawing of electoral maps, which faced criticism for being unnecessary and over-favouring the incumbent government. For one, critics argued the redrawing of maps was not necessary, as the Election Commission had already finalised the decisions. Furthermore, the power given to the military-linked Election Commission by Prayut, to draw the maps in any way they so pleased, was seen as a facilitator of gerrymandering. The redrawn maps significantly favoured the Prayut-aligned government. Districts favouring Palang Pracharath, the *de facto* party of Prayut, were separated into multiple constituencies, and therefore more MP seats, while some opposition districts were merged. Additionally, in some districts, electoral maps were completely redrawn (the Election Commission sometimes even opting for a district map excluded from the previously presented options). The result was several unconventional and strangely-shaped electoral districts, drawn to favour the incumbent military government. Because of the process's triviality, the Election Commission's inherent bias, and through its notable Prayut-favouring maps, the redrawing of maps in the 2019 election represented a case of gerrymandering, meant to influence the election's results before voting even began.

Redistricting, or the redrawing of electoral maps, when employed by politicians not for its democratic purpose of maintaining fair and equal political representation but instead to disproportionately benefit a particular political party or group, becomes gerrymandering. Individuals and parties have used this tool to engineer, rather than fairly win, elections, tilting an electoral field before a single ballot is cast. However, gerrymandering is a form of indirect interference in that it is completely within the law and operates under the democratic system. It is only when it is abused for political advantage and to influence electoral outcomes that it becomes undemocratic. Still, when gerrymandering does occur, it

distorts representation in elections, subverting the people's will, and therefore, contributes to a larger sentiment of disillusionment with the democratic system, corruptible and manipulable by politicians.

ELECTION BOYCOTTS

The results of the 2006 general election detailed a historic landslide victory for the incumbent Thai Rak Thai Party, led by Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, which came in first, winning 461 out of the 500 seats up for contention. The election represented the biggest landslide victory for the party and one of the biggest in Thai history, entrusting the Thai Rak Thai with an overwhelming mandate for governance and showcasing its dominance over electoral politics. Furthermore, it seemed to display mass endorsement of the Thaksin administration despite lingering political tensions and pre-election protests against the government. However, the 2006 election would not result in a functioning government. Instead, it led to weeks of political instability and paralysis, growing protests, the resignation of Thaksin, the subsequent nullification of the election by the Constitutional Court, and ultimately led to the 2006 military coup d'état, which overturned one of Thailand's most democratic constitutions, eliminated the first fully-elected bicameral parliament in Thai history, and brought to power a military junta. The political turmoil directly preceding the 2006 coup d'état, and surrounding the 2006 elections, was set into motion not by extra-systemic forces or military intervention but by an election boycott, issued by three major opposition parties: the Democrat, Thai Nation, and Mahachon Party.

The parties' justification included the lack of time needed for preparation (the 2006 elections were snap elections), the government's unwillingness to pledge constitutional reform, and

a protest against perceived strategic timing from Thaksin. The reasons for the boycott, framed as a moral protest, were not inherently undemocratic, but its direct aftermath and consequences made it ultimately undemocratic. First, the boycott undermined the spirit of free and fair electoral competition. The boycott of the parties meant virtually no opposition for the incumbent Thai Rak Thai Party, as evidenced by the final seat count and the fact that many races saw the party run unopposed. This effectively denied voters any real choice, making votes seem arbitrary and voting meaningless, perceptions which could heavily hinder voter turnout and enthusiasm. Furthermore, this move gave opposition voters no representation on the ballots. Voters in provinces which were traditionally aligned with opposition parties marked the abstain choice, even when the only candidate on the ballot was from the Thai Rak Thai Party, producing an undemocratic problem. The election, though overwhelmingly handed to the Thai Rak Thai Party, did not produce a workable and operable parliament. Due to the opposition's boycott and subsequent lack of choice for voters, it looked as if all 100 party-list seats were going to be handed to Thai Rak Thai. This, however, presented a problem when one of the party-list candidates suddenly resigned from the party. This meant that the max capacity of the House of Representatives, 500 members, needed to convene was no longer reachable, as no other party had yet gotten 5 percent of the vote needed for a party-list seat. Furthermore, the high number of voters voting abstain meant a high number of Thai Rak Thai candidates failed to win the 20 percent threshold needed to win a seat. This then triggered numerous by-elections, which were also unlikely to fill all the seats of the House of Representatives. The lack of MPs needed to convene meant a session of the House of Representatives was unable to be opened, and therefore a speaker of the House and prime minister

could not be elected either. Following weeks of this parliamentary paralysis and coupled with petitions about the irregularity of voting procedures, the Constitutional Court declared the election null and void, leaving Thailand without a legitimate parliament or prime minister. This, then, paved the way for the 2006 military coup d'état.

Election boycotts are, in theory, within the rules and norms of democracy. In fact, they are democratic mechanisms. If a party so chooses, it can refrain from sending candidates or participating in elections and, in some cases, urging supporters to also choose to boycott an election. In the most authoritarian of conditions, boycotts can signal a powerful message against the unfairness and unfreeness of an election, and they can be used as powerful tools to combat and bring light to illegitimacy in an election. They can also be used as tools of protest to highlight fraud, repression, and the absence of meaningful competition. However, like in 2006, election boycotts can become undemocratic when they leave voters without meaningful choice in a semi-free or competitive election, paralyse the parliamentary process and hamper government, and invite extra-systemic intervention, such as a military coup d'état. Furthermore, boycotts, particularly in a Thai context, are largely ineffective and generate paradoxical effects. The 2006 boycott signalled to voters that an election could not bring about meaningful reform, stability, or a competent government. Though justified as a defence of democratic principles, it ultimately, instead, weakened Thailand's democracy and inadvertently, facilitated the 2006 military coup d'état. A similar boycott by the Democrat Party in 2014 mirrored the aftermath of the 2006 elections, with the government of Yingluck Shinawatra, Thaksin's sister, being thrown into instability and paralysis and, coupled with the nullification of the 2014 election by the Constitutional Court and growing protest, effectively paved the way for the 2014 military coup d'état.⁶ The boycott, a fundamentally

democratic mechanism meant to be used as a powerful last resort, when utilised by politicians without meaningful rationale or when it generates political instability, uncertainty, or deadlock, becomes undemocratic, making the elections unfair and unfree, and ultimately eroding democracy through decreasing public trust in the electoral process and paving way for extra-systemic intervention.

POPULISM

Populism, a political approach which derives its core from the appeal it presents to disenfranchised voters, is almost synonymous with modern Thai elections. It draws its power not from political ideology but from rhetoric that appeals to a particular group of people, usually those frustrated with the outcomes and results of the democratic, parliamentary system. In this, it is most often associated with anti-establishment or anti-elite sentiment. The rhetoric also promotes simplicity, suggesting simple solutions to complex, nuanced political problems. Populist rhetoric often appears in the form of policy proposals and campaign promises, and it encompasses a wide variety of ideologies and is employed, popularly, by a variety of political parties. What makes it especially prevalent in Thailand, however, is populism's application in situations of high perceived inequality or lack of social mobilisation. Populism works historically well in poorer and more rural provinces, as it identifies politicians with voters who feel left out of the political system, directly appealing to disillusionment and disenfranchisement.

But, in some cases, populism may harm and undermine democracy. For one, its rhetoric of pitting 'the people' against 'the elite' may overly-decrease trust in political institutions and weaken democratic institutions meant to keep a check and balance on elected government. Furthermore, it often rallies supporters around

a single, charismatic leader, pushing support of people rather than ideology or policy. But most importantly, in Thailand's electoral context, populism is employed in two main frameworks which make it harmful for democracy. For one, populism is often used by politicians as a campaigning tool which promises to use state resources to fund large schemes. These policies, not inherently undemocratic, become harmful when they are fiscally unrealistic, abuse state resources, or are designed to secure short-term electoral support in return for short-term material incentives. Secondly, incumbents, already in power before an election, may use state resources and design populist policies to increase their odds in the lead-up to an election. Populist policies in Thailand most often include cash injections, subsidies, debt relief, and welfare programmes designed to provide immediate economic benefits to voters.

In campaigning, historically, populism has been seemingly intertwined with one specific sector of Thai politics: political parties aligned with Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, including the Thai Rak Thai, People's Power, and Pheu Thai parties. These Thaksin-aligned parties have consolidated immense political capital through its performance in elections, winning many landslide victories under its various iterations through its pledging of large, populist schemes in campaigning. In fact, the term 'Thaksinomics', used to describe the economic policies of Thaksin, largely encompasses his populist rhetoric of using broad, highly tangible economic benefits to mobilise electoral support, particularly among rural and lower-income voters. For example, in the 2001 general election, the Thaksin-led Thai Rak Thai Party ran on a large populist platform which included policies like the Universal Coverage Scheme (UCS), the Village Fund, and an extended debt moratorium for farmers, securing him a near-majority in parliament. Further expansion to these policies was used as campaigning in the subsequent 2005

election, in which Thaksin won a landslide majority. The People's Power Party, the *de facto* successor to the Thai Rak Thai after it was dissolved by the Constitutional Court, similarly ran on an extension of the original 2001 policy platform, winning the 2007 election. In 2011, the Pheu Thai Party, the successor to the People's Power Party, ran on a similar platform, notably adding the rice-pledging scheme to its slate of campaign promises, winning in yet another electoral landslide. The 2019 election displayed another electoral triumph of the Pheu Thai Party, with the party running on similar populist policies, though without a flagship scheme similar to that of the 2001 and 2011 elections.⁷ In 2023, the Pheu Thai saw a return to its pledge of large, populist policies with the 10,000-baht Digital Wallet scheme and in 2026 it saw the introduction of a 'nine new millionaires a day' policy, drawn from the party's party-list number of nine. Though controversial and heavily criticised, the campaign policies of the Thaksin-aligned parties are generally not undemocratic. However, through populist platforms which encourage short-term voting based on immediate material gain rather than long-term policy evaluation, are overreliant on fiscally questionable promises, and foster clientelistic relationships between politicians and voters, they can distort electoral competition and decrease an election's representativeness, thereby undermining democracy. This is especially apparent when populist, flagship schemes, which usually promise large cash-handouts or short-term material benefit, are presented in the lead-up to an election as a core policy.

For example, in the lead-up to the 2011 election, the Pheu Thai Party introduced its infamous rice-pledging scheme, initially pitched as a populist economic policy designed to aid Thailand's large base of rice farmers (a key constituency in northern and northeastern Thailand historically associated with Thaksin and his parties). The Pheu Thai's campaign proposal outlined the basics of

the scheme: the Thai government would buy rice from farmers, who would pledge the rice to the government at an above-market price in order to aid poor farmers and stimulate the economy. This specific policy, a part of a larger populist policy platform, led to the Pheu Thai Party's electoral win in 2011, securing a majority in parliament. The rice-pledging scheme, through its usage as a campaigning tool, was not undemocratic. It was, however, seen as highly populist and harmful, with critics warning about its fiscal irresponsibility and concerns about public debt. Non-partisan institutions also pointed to the past failures of the People's Power Party in implementing a similar rice pledging scheme. Furthermore, the programme also encouraged the prioritisation of short-term economic benefit over long-term policy evaluation, with a focus on direct monetary and material aid to farmers through the buying of rice. Despite continuing opposition from both national and international organisations and institutions, the Yingluck government pushed through with the rice-pledging scheme, determined to fulfil their campaign promise. The scheme, however, ultimately turned out to be a failure. Thailand lost hundreds of billions of baht and stockpiled around 19 million metric tons of unsold rice. Critics also made the case that the programme only aided rich and middle-income farmers, as poor farmers could not produce nearly as much rice for pledging. Furthermore, Thailand dropped from its number one spot as the world's biggest rice exporter, a position it had held for decades. In all, the rice-pledging scheme failed in its goal of boosting the nation's economy and sent Thailand into a period of economic downturn. Because its initial campaign policy, and subsequent execution in government, was fiscally irresponsible and designed to secure short-term support in return for material incentives, it ultimately undermined democracy by prioritising electoral gain over policy-making and long-term public interest.

Similarly, the Pheu Thai Party's flagship policy in the 2023 election, the 10,000-baht Digital Wallet scheme, highlighted strategic populist campaign policy design which prioritised short-term vote gain and clientelist relationships over fiscal responsibility. However, unlike the rice-pledging scheme, the Digital Wallet scheme entailed a direct handout, outlining the distribution of 10,000 baht to each eligible citizen through a digital wallet to spark economic growth. The flagship policy, during the lead-up to the election, garnered intense criticism, as it was seen as a form of indirect vote buying, promising a material handout if the Pheu Thai was elected into office. Furthermore, it raised concerns about fiscal responsibility and financing. Still, the flagship policy propelled the Pheu Thai Party into second place in the 2023 election, allowing it to form a government. In its implementation, the 10,000-baht Digital Wallet scheme encountered many difficulties. For one, its financing became a topic of great scrutiny, with the government constantly flip-flopping over its source, ultimately opting to take an estimated 450 billion baht from the 2024 and 2025 fiscal budgets. Throughout, the scheme was heavily criticised by opposition parties, academics, and the governor of the Bank of Thailand for being an unwarranted fiscal risk and for prioritising short-term political gain over long-term economic stability. Both the rice-pledging and the Digital Wallet scheme display how populist campaign policies, often those associated with Thaksin-aligned parties, are electorally effective, due to their specific appeal to lower-income, rural voters, but are often simultaneously dangerous to democracy, as they are often fiscally irresponsible and establish a direct connection between elections and material incentives.

Another way populist policy is harmful to democracy is when it is employed by an incumbent directly before an election

in an effort to influence the election results through garnering populist support. Because of its specific timing, near the end of a government's term and in the lead-up to an election, the policy itself is largely part of an effort to deliberately increase government favourability. However, because these policies are usually large and costly programs, its implementation effectively becomes an abuse of state resources for electoral gain. An example of a pre-election handout is the Pracharath Welfare Cards distributed by the incumbent Palang Pracharath Party in the lead-up to the 2019 election. The programme, seen as being designed partly to compete with the Thaksin-aligned parties' populist policies, gave poor Thais 200-300 baht a month to spend in government-approved shops, which put out a 'Pracharath Blue Flag' sign to indicate participation. Furthermore, card holders received allowances for public transportation, among other things. However, the programme was heavily criticised for its perceived ineffectiveness and for being a form of indirect vote buying. For one, critics argued that the programme had not set up clear methods of evaluating its economic impact and was not concise in its implementation. More importantly, the Pracharath Welfare Cards were widely seen as a facilitator of vote buying through clientelism. Its very name, which included part of the incumbent party's name, directly associated the programme, and therefore its material benefits, with the party, establishing a dependency relationship between citizens and the Palang Pracharath Party. Additionally, the programme directly used state resources to implement targeted welfare programmes, branded with the Pracharath name, and which was specifically designed as a populist policy to increase the party's political support among the poor. The Pracharath Welfare Cards, in this, acted as a strategically timed populist policy meant to garner electoral support through targeted welfare programs and the usage of state resources to fund

clientelist relationships, ultimately distorting elections and undermining democracy.

Populism is not inherently undemocratic. But, when it is used in campaign promises which centre on large scale programmes designed to provide short-term material benefit in return for a vote, often fiscally irresponsible and costly, and when it is employed by incumbents who use state resources in the execution of targeted welfare programmes and handouts, populism becomes harmful to democracy. Though it is electorally effective, populism distorts elections by shifting voter evaluation away from long-term policy outcomes and political ideology, and shifting it toward short-term material incentives. This dynamic is further intensified by the clientelistic relationships populist policies often create between the state and voters. Ultimately, populism in this form weakens democratic accountability by incentivising short-term electoral gain over long-term public interest and policy responsibility.



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