

The Limitations on Democratization in Thailand through the Lens of the 2006 Military Coup

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Abstract

This essay analyzes the military coup that occurred in Thailand on September 19, 2006. It considers what led to this event in a country many considered as having made substantial progress in consolidating its democracy. The main argument focuses on the lack of a mass political movement or group that is well-organized, well-financed, and motivated enough to mount a successful, sustained challenge to the key power holders in Thailand: high-level government politicians, the Thai owners or major Thai shareholders of large domestic corporations, and high-ranking military leaders. The lack of a strong and varied interest group structure in Thailand is a critical fissure in the country's political system. Interest group weaknesses have four characteristics: (1) the imbalance of power between the state and interest groups remains highly skewed toward the government; (2) much of the interest group community lacks enough autonomy from the state to effectively promote political reforms; (3) interest groups are fragmented in ways that create major obstacles to forming national coalitions or political parties that support democratization; and (4) the proclivities of Thai history favor a strong monarchy and there is no colonial legacy. These weaknesses contribute substantially to the tenuousness of Thai democracy and leave the political system open to dominance by such powerful players.

On September 19, 2006, while caretaker Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra was on an official visit to the United States, a group of military and police leaders launched a successful coup d'état against his government. This was the first such military coup since 1991 and defied a belief held by many people (including this author) that such coups were a thing of the past, or at least extremely unlikely. Various news outlets have commented on the apparent

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proximate causes of the coup. These causes include attempts by Thaksin's government to place sympathetic allies in the military leadership, indignation about accusations of military involvement in an assassination attempt on Thaksin, and public disgust with corruption among Thaksin and his political allies. This article explores the reasons for the coup from a less proximate and longer-term perspective. How could a military coup occur in a country acknowledged as having made the transition to democracy and seen as on its way to consolidating that transition?

Before the coup, there was a consensus that Thailand was a democracy. It had made the transition to what has been dubbed a "formal democracy" or an "electoral democracy."¹ If so, what is missing from Thailand's democratic credentials that allowed an unelected, army-led government to take control, abrogate the constitution, and place strong restrictions on the media and political gatherings? A number of factors help to answer this question. This essay focuses on the lack of a mass political movement or group that is well-organized, well-financed, and motivated enough to mount a successful, sustained challenge to the key power holders in Thailand. These key powers in Thailand are high-level government politicians (typically at the cabinet level), the Thai owners or major Thai shareholders of large domestic corporations, and high-ranking military leaders.² Over the past three to four decades, these groups have driven the overall direction of Thai democracy, so understanding who might confront this political dominance says a great deal about the future of Thai politics.

The limitations on such mass political activity's offering a serious challenge to the dominant powers have much to do with the underdeveloped state of interest groups in Thailand.³ Interest groups have made substantial

¹ Formal democracy refers to a political system with regular free and fair elections, universal suffrage, accountability of the state's administrative organs to the elected representatives, and effective guarantees for freedom of expression and association. See Evelyn Huber, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and John D. Stephens, "The Paradoxes of Contemporary Democracy: Formal, Participatory, and Social Dimensions," *Comparative Politics* 29, no. 3 (April 1997): 323. An electoral democracy has the following qualities: (1) a competitive, multiparty political system; (2) universal adult suffrage for all citizens; (3) regularly contested elections, conducted in conditions of ballot secrecy and reasonable ballot security, and in the absence of massive voter fraud; and (4) significant public access for major political parties to the electorate. See Freedom House, Methodology section, *Freedom in the World 2005*, <http://www.freedomhouse.org> (accessed October 5, 2006).

² Though these three categories have substantial overlap—especially between the politicians and business owners—they derive their respective powers from rather different foundations.

³ An interest group has all of the following characteristics: (1) it is a well-defined organization whose members are formally allied to one another for some stated purpose; (2) it is not a member of the legislature or executive branch and has no explicit aim to join the legislature or the executive; (3) it is not a government organization with staff paid directly from government budget expenditure items; and (4) it has some level of activity in the process of formulating, approving, and/or implementing public policies.

strides over the past twenty-five years in Thailand, growing more numerous, diverse, geographically widespread, professionally organized, and openly active in influencing public policy. However, the interest group community is quite fragmented and some key interest group communities in Thailand remain weak (e.g., labor unions). The lack of an effective, organized, interest group community—corporatist or otherwise—leaves Thailand’s post-2006 military coup leadership with an easier task, because the elimination of former Prime Minister Thaksin from power has put a significant damper on two of the three main power-holding groups in Thailand (i.e., high-level politicians and big business, closely associated with the Thaksin government). When the coup leaders abrogated the constitution, the many interest groups that strongly supported its promulgation in 1997—especially among nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—offered little resistance. When the coup leaders exercised strict control over the content of every major Thai news outlet, the loudest uproar over restrictions on press freedom came from foreign sources.⁴ In essence, the coup has demonstrated the inability of Thai interest groups to aggregate support for major political reforms.

It is too easy to blame the Thaksin government for quashing interest groups critical of his rule (and co-opting various groups when possible). The weaknesses in Thailand’s interest groups run deeper and have placed major obstacles in the way of any effort to form a mass-based political movement, much less a mass-based political party. While simply making interest groups stronger is not enough to bring about a “full” consolidation of democracy in Thailand,⁵ one broad conclusion of this essay is that such strengthening is a critical component for making Thai democracy more robust. If Thais do not wish to see the recurrence of the problems associated with Thaksin’s rule, along with the loss of rights under the military leadership, the invigoration of interest groups will make a notable contribution to the solution.

Some Theoretical Considerations

The question posed for Thailand could be reframed more generally: When democratic consolidations experience major setbacks, to what extent does the development of interest groups cause these setbacks? The scholarship on democratic consolidation clearly shows that a wide range of factors

⁴ This lack of domestic opposition is understandable. There is a significant probability of arrest or other legal action for overt criticism of the coup leadership. The King of Thailand’s official approval of the coup (and some have suggested significant unofficial support before the coup) brought anticoup statements a small step from lese majesty. The increased level of proroyal sentiment that preceded the coup by about one year augmented this situation.

⁵ Thomas Carothers and William Barndt, “Civil Society,” *Foreign Policy* 117 (Winter 1999-2000): 21-23.

contributes to such setbacks.⁶ The literature on the relationship between civil society organizations and politics—a literature in which interest groups play a critical role—demonstrates the extensive impact of civil society organizations on political institutions and democratization. Streek and Schmitter note that, although associations (their term for interest groups) are sometimes obstacles to the emergence of democratic governments, the advantages of associations for promoting more equitable and less conflict-prone societies outweigh their costs.⁷ Diamond sees important roles for civil society organizations to monitor government activities, improve the understanding of government, motivate political participation and debate, promote compromises, and provide channels for the rise of future decision-makers.⁸ Looking at Asian countries, Alagappa also found that civil society organizations can foster public participation in politics and strengthen oversight of the state.⁹

If interest groups can foster changes which promote democratic consolidation, limitations in interest-group development are likely to bring about setbacks to consolidation. A number of limitations stand out as potential reasons for such setbacks in Thailand. First, the power of the state versus the powers of interest groups may have a significant impact on attempts at political reform. In the United States and various Western European countries, many powerful organizations, such as labor unions and pressure groups representing particular economic sectors, substantially influence political decisions. States have many powers but interest groups—well-established and often operating autonomously from the government—strongly constrain these powers in a variety of ways, such as corporatism in Germany and American-style “special interest groups” (e.g., the American Association of Retired Persons or the National Rifle Association). However, in democratizing Asia, the state remains

⁶ A broader, underlying theoretical question is: On what sort of weaknesses should we focus our attention for countries still in the early stages of democratic consolidation? This essay does not address that question directly, though the literature on this subject is substantial. See Dankwart A. Rustow, “Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model,” *Comparative Politics* 2, no. 3 (April 1970): 337-363; Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Guillermo O’Donnell, “Illusions about Consolidation,” *Journal of Democracy* 7, no. 2 (April 1996): 34-51; and John Higley and Michael G. Burton, “The Elite Variable in Democratic Transitions and Breakdowns,” *American Sociological Review* 54, no. 1 (February 1989): 17-32.

⁷ Wolfgang Streek and Philippe C. Schmitter, “Community, Market, State—and Associations? The Prospective Contribution of Interest Governance to Social Order,” in *Private Interest Government: Beyond Market and State*, ed. Wolfgang Streek and Philippe C. Schmitter (London: SAGE Publications, 1985), 1-29.

⁸ Larry Diamond, “Consolidating Democracy in the Americas,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 550 (March 1997): 37-38.

⁹ Muthiah Alagappa, “Civil Society and Political Change: An Analytical Framework,” in *Civil Society and Political Change in Asia: Expanding and Contracting Democratic Space*, ed. Muthiah Alagappa (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 50.

the “most powerful institution” and continues to have a deep impact on the daily operations and evolution of interest groups.¹⁰ A powerful state is unlikely to initiate and sustain efforts at democratic consolidation.

As a corollary to the relative power of the state versus interest groups, the second possible limitation to interest group influence over democratization is the degree to which such groups are autonomous of the state. Interest groups which are under substantial state control—for example, they receive a large proportion of their funding from the government—are less likely to challenge the vested interest that supports the existing political system than groups whose powers (or existence) do not depend significantly on the state. Similarly, the extent of interest groups’ collaboration with political leaders will affect how much change in the existing political order they actively promote. The more closely connected that groups are to the political leadership the less likely they are to advocate major political reforms. Groups with close connections to the existing regime are likely to focus more on changing specific government policies and less on far-reaching changes to the political system.

Third, when interest groups are small and few in number, political leaders find it easy to ignore their demands. Other than the rare occasions when a group finds an issue which captures the sustained attention of the mass voting public, these groups typically lack substantial influence over political decisions. A small group representing an important industry or economic sector may exercise notable influence in that industry/sector, but this is highly unlikely to translate into broad sway over national-level policymaking. Political leaders operate on the assumption that no single group has the resources to challenge their power and that there are not enough groups with similar interests to form an alliance which threatens these leaders. This lack of accountability creates obstacles to democratic consolidation by enabling political leaders to act with greater impunity and fosters an environment in which leaders believe that they have the means to maintain a grip on power.

Fourth, even if a large number and variety of interest groups exist, a high degree of fragmentation among these groups may work to the benefit of leaders with nondemocratic motivations. A high level of fragmentation tends to limit the ability of various organized interests to agree about basic policy priorities and to demonstrate enough unity to present a viable challenge to political leaders. Political leaders can adopt a “divide and conquer” strategy that represses recalcitrant groups, awards (and often co-opts) cooperative groups, and ignores weak groups.¹¹ Various successful mass-based democratic

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹¹ This fits with Kitschelt’s ideas about clientelist citizen-elite linkages. “When politicians invest in administrative-technical infrastructure but not in modes of interest aggregation and program formation, they create bonds with their following through direct, personal, and typically material side payments.” See Herbert Kitschelt, “Linkages between Citizens and Politicians in

movements and successful political parties with significant nationwide electoral support have emerged from organized interests coalescing around a set of basic democratic reforms. For example, during the mid- to late 1980s, a key period in South Korea's democratization,

...the prodemocracy alliance of civil society incorporated the threefold solidarity of students, workers, and churches and furthermore encompassed the middle class. Civil society groups were effectively united and led by national associations that consisted of numerous sectoral and regional organizations, and civil groups also coordinated with the opposition party through numerous joint organizations.¹²

Fifth, historical trends can account for limitation in the development of interest groups. In particular, the genesis and popular legitimacy of key interest groups may depend on a legacy of colonial rule or military occupation by a foreign power. To use the example of South Korea again, the period of Japanese occupation from 1910 to 1945 contributed substantially to a mode of "conflictual engagement" between the state and civil society.¹³ That mode became a powerful force when prodemocracy groups faced off against a strong and recalcitrant state that was often willing to use violent means against its opponents.¹⁴

Brief Background

Former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra first led his Thai Rak Thai ("Thai Love Thai," or TRT) Party into power via parliamentary elections in 2001, a victory which was followed by another in the February 2005 elections. Discontent with Thaksin's rule, particularly concerning accusations of major corruption within his government and his authoritarian style of leadership, led to open demonstrations against him and his political allies. Faced with anti-Thaksin protests, led by the People's Alliance for Democracy and that often comprised tens of thousands of people, he called snap House elections for early April 2006. After a boycott of the April elections by the main opposition

Democratic Polities," *Comparative Political Studies* 33, no. 6 (2000): 849. In other words, it is politically expedient to provide individualized benefits (pork) to groups and not to promote interest aggregation.

¹² Sunhyuk Kim, "South Korea: Confrontational Legacy and Democratic Contributions," in *Civil Society and Political Change in Asia: Expanding and Contracting Democratic Space*, ed. Muthiah Alagappa (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 143.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 140.

¹⁴ The presence of the United States military in South Korea after World War II, along with the United States government's strong anticommunist stance, led to brutal suppression of many groups deemed leftist or otherwise threatening to the American-backed regime.

parties, Thai Rak Thai maintained its absolute majority in the House but a substantial number of House seats remained vacant. Thaksin took a self-styled “break” from politics, then returned as the caretaker prime minister in late May 2006. In August, Thaksin arrested a number of army officers, accusing them of plotting to assassinate him.

The military coup took place on the night of September 19, 2006. The coup leadership—predominantly a group of high-ranking military commanders—called themselves the Council for Democratic Reform (CDR).¹⁵ The CDR abrogated the 1997 constitution, cancelled parliamentary elections scheduled for October, dissolved the parliament, and declared martial law. The CDR clamped down heavily on the media, including Internet sites, and banned nearly all types of political gatherings. Until very recently, existing political parties were prohibited from meeting and new parties could not form (officially or unofficially). The CDR’s decision to appoint General Surayud Chulanont as prime minister received the King of Thailand’s royal approval on October 1, 2006.

Organized Interests, the Coup, and Democratization

Although this essay will note the many weaknesses of the organized interest group community in Thailand, it is worth putting matters in perspective by noting the changes in this community over the past few decades. Those changes have enabled interest groups to contribute to Thailand’s democratic consolidation. However, the overall argument of this essay is that existing limitations in the development of these groups pose a major obstacle to further consolidation.

The number of interest groups in Thailand has expanded steadily since 1979, spurred by a variety of factors, which include the increasing sophistication and size of the Thai economy, a decline in the authoritarian exercise of political power by the Thai military, growing levels of education, and technological advances in communications and transportation, which have facilitated the aggregation of similar interests across the country. The only reliable Thai data on interest groups nationwide show an increase from 6,568 “public interest organizations” in 1989 to 8,406 in 2001.¹⁶ Also, the structures of interest groups have grown more diverse. Business and trade associations cover a wider array of industries and professions than previously, and groups

¹⁵ The CDR is now called the Council for Democratic Reform under the Constitutional Monarchy.

¹⁶ For the 1989 data, see Amara Pongsapich and Nitaya Kataleradabhan, *Thailand Nonprofit Sector and Social Development* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Institute of Social Research, 1997), 79. For the 2001 data, see Institute of Social Research, *Public Interest Organizations in Thailand* [in Thai] (Bangkok: Institute of Social Research, Chulalongkorn University, 2003), 104.

which promote environmental conservation now operate in every province. Interest groups have become more “professional” in their operations over the last two decades. They increasingly hire full-time staff to manage publicity, membership, fundraising, research, and advocacy work. Their funding has increased and comes from a greater variety of sources. They use more sophisticated technology and marketing techniques to promote their causes. Moreover, interest groups have demonstrated a growing willingness to lobby the government and voters on major public policy issues. Since 1979, these groups have organized more demonstrations and protests, arranged more forums for bringing together policymakers and group members/supporters, and used the media and Internet to push their views more aggressively.¹⁷

Despite the progress made in the development of organized interest groups during the past few decades, four of the five limitations to interest group influence over the democratization process raised in the previous section apply well to the Thai case. Thai interest groups lack autonomy, are fragmented, demonstrate a reluctance to engage directly in certain key forms of political participation, and always have been under the shadow of a strong state. The one exception is the rationale concerning small numbers of organized interest groups. For purposes of judging Thai events in 2006, this rationale has little explanatory power. The lamentable lack of cross-country comparative data on interest groups aside, the Thai interest group community had grown enough before the 2006 coup to warrant claiming that it was no longer “small.” Although Thailand does not approach the dense associational structures found in countries such as the United States and Britain, legally registered Thai grass-roots organizations and professional/trade associations, particularly, have expanded their numbers and geographic reach. The number of social service organizations grew from 187 in 1989 to 1,938 by 2001.¹⁸ The number of registered professional/trade associations increased from 135 in 1982 to 227 by 2005.¹⁹ The growth in the number and activities of interest groups was especially notable after the 1997 economic crisis.²⁰ Overall, the lack of influence held by organized interest groups in Thailand arises from causes other than the sheer quantity of them.

The rest of this section will elaborate on the remaining four limitations and how they arise in the Thai case. First, in line with Alagappa’s conclusion that the state remains by far the dominant political force in Asian countries, Thailand’s state has given up few of its historically strong powers to interest

¹⁷ Aaron M. Stern, “Institutional Change in Legislatures: Thailand’s House of Representatives, 1979-2002,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 2006), 83-84.

¹⁸ Pongsapich and Kataleeradabhan, *Thailand Nonprofit Sector*, 79, and Institute of Social Research, *Public Interest Organizations*, 104.

¹⁹ Stern, “Institutional Change in Legislatures,” 193.

²⁰ Naruemon Thabchumpon, “NGOs and Grassroots Participation in the Political Reform Process,” in *Reforming Thai Politics*, ed. Duncan McCargo (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2002), 189-191.

groups or other elements of civil society. For example, section 78 of the 1997 constitution (the constitution abrogated by the 2006 coup) mandated the decentralization of central government powers to local government authorities, a step many community leaders saw as a way for local organizations to play a more significant role in government policymaking. However, there was no progress in decentralization under Thaksin's rule and it is highly unlikely that circumstances will change under the current government leadership. Religious organizations, powerful interest groups in many countries such as the Philippines and various Latin American nations, are strongly regulated by and associated with the state in Thailand. Perhaps most importantly, the Thai government exercises major influence over funding for many interest groups, especially community development organizations, which have tended to most actively challenge government policy priorities and decisions.²¹

Second, large numbers of Thailand's interest groups have strong connections with the government. Phatharathananunth has noted how some prominent proponents of political reform advocate having an "elite civil society" in which civil society organizations are not autonomous from the state but work in direct partnerships with it. Members of the Thai elite play a major role in forming civil society groups and guiding their activities.²² Given that the elite has benefited from the current configuration of the Thai state, its members have little interest in changes that more strident members of civil society support. Admittedly, interest groups (particularly NGOs without strong ties to business) contributed notably to the writing and passage of the 1997 constitution, Thailand's most progressive constitution, which many heralded as a way to promote greater political participation and reduced government control over interest groups' activities. However, Thaksin's rule dashed many of these hopes and fostered an environment in which closer cooperation with the government was often the only way for an interest group to pursue its goals effectively. Under Thaksin, what became clear to the groups which had helped to spur the constitutional drafting and approval process was that the political party system had changed little, despite reforms to the election system and the parliament.

Yet, only fringe elements of the interest group community have shown any inclination to shake up Thai politics by forming a viable political party. Unlike similar groups in many other countries such as Indonesia, Thai interest groups typically view direct involvement in politics as "dirty" and risky because of a possible loss of public support for their activities. This is ironic because, by disengaging from a key form of political participation, interest groups have

²¹ Somchai Phatharathananunth, "Civil Society and Democratization in Thailand: A Critique of Elite Democracy," in *Reforming Thai Politics*, ed. Duncan McCargo (Copenhagen: NIAS, 2002), 136-137.

²² *Ibid.*, 133-135.

lessened their overall ability to influence the democratization process. Even so, losing public support is a legitimate fear. Table 1 indicates that the military and big business in Thailand have substantially greater credibility with the Thai public than NGOs, a fact not lost on many NGOs that are engaged in politically-oriented pursuits.

Figure 1. Thai Public Trust in Selected Institutions, 2004

	Trust A Lot/ Trust to a Degree	Don't Really Trust/Don't Trust at All	Difference
Nongovernmental Organizations (n=729)	60.9%	39.1%	60.9% - 39.1% = 21.8%
Army (n=779)	91.7%	8.3%	91.7% - 8.3% = 83.4%
Large Domestic Companies (n=729)	72.2%	27.8%	72.2% - 27.8% = 44.4%
Central Government (n=794)	85.9%	14.1%	85.9% - 14.1% = 71.8%

Source: AsiaBarometer Survey, 2004.

Furthermore, Thailand’s interest groups direct their resources far more toward changing specific policies than effecting major political reforms. One Thai scholar has distinguished between procedural political reform (“the process of creating the legal mechanism required for a better political system, chiefly by means of constitutional reform”), and substantive political reform (especially, improving political participation and accountability of government authorities to the public). NGOs are key proponents of substantive political reform.²³ However, the vast majority of Thailand’s NGOs concentrate on a narrow issue area, such as environmental degradation, human trafficking, or child education. Laothamatas argued that business associations had become more powerful in influencing specific governmental policies, but these narrow, policy-oriented efforts remain their main focus. And business associations (along with all interest groups) have long been prohibited by law from financing political parties or candidates. They also have shied away from direct links with political parties and the legislature, preferring to work with bureaucrats and, more recently, seeking changes in laws affecting their interests.²⁴

²³ Thabchumpon, “NGOs and Grassroots Participation,” 183.

²⁴ Anek Laothamatas, *Business Associations and the New Political Economy of Thailand: From Bureaucratic Polity to Liberal Corporatism* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992), 112-115, and Stern, “Institutional Change in Legislatures,” 129.

Third, interest group fragmentation poses major problems for democratic consolidation in Thailand. In the same vein, this fragmentation contributes much to the lack of a determined, well-organized, nationwide opposition to the military coup. There are three key aspects to this fragmentation: (1) urban-rural cleavages; (2) ineffective national alliances of interest groups; and (3) the relationships between interest groups and political parties.

A common theme among those writing about Thai democratization is urban-rural cleavages. The essence of this theme is that Thailand's predominantly rural and agriculturally-based citizens see democracy as a way to secure benefits for themselves and their communities, not as a vehicle for pursuing an identifiable ideological objective (e.g., "socialism") or policies with a national scope (e.g., universal health care). In the general description of the rift between urban and rural attitudes, urban citizens (mainly a reference to members of the middle and upper classes) believe rural citizens fail to see the national-level implications of their actions and lack enough understanding of democratic politics to serve the nation fairly and effectively. Rural citizens view urban denizens as ignorant or condescending of their daily trials, even though the urban citizens must rely on them to provide key resources, particularly food and cheap labor.²⁵

In the context of interest groups, the urban-rural cleavage has contributed to the absence of a mass-based political movement that encompasses large swathes of the rural citizenry. In the push for political reform, urban groups have tended to emphasize reducing corruption and strengthening civil liberties. Rural groups have stressed a more equitable distribution of government benefits and greater freedom to develop their communities without heavy-handed government control. These various goals could be compatible but the divergence between urban and rural thinking has created difficulties for people seeking to build a lasting urban-rural alliance. Such alliances have occurred, most notably in response to 1992 events following the military coup in 1991. However, this was a temporary union that dissipated when the coup leadership withdrew from power. An uneasy alliance of urban and rural advocates of political reform led the drafting and promulgation of the 1997 constitution, seen as Thailand's most progressive constitution. But this alliance was no match for the leadership of a military coup that abrogated the 1997 constitution with little protest. In sum, the potential of a major coalition of urban and interest groups to push for democratic reforms is substantial, but there are few short-

²⁵ For a more detailed explanation of the cleavage, see Robert B. Albritton, Thawilwadee Bureekul, and Gang Guo, *Impacts of Rural-Urban Cleavages and Cultural Orientations on Attitudes toward Elements of Democracy: A Cross-National, within Nation Analysis*, Working Paper No. 6 (Taipei: Asian Barometer Project Office, National Taiwan University and Academia Sinica, 2003), <http://www.asianbarometer.org/> (accessed January 29, 2007), 3-6; Also see Thabchumpon, "NGOs and Grassroots Participation," 194-198, and Eva-Lotta E. Hedman, "Contesting State and Civil Society: Southeast Asian Trajectories," *Modern Asian Studies* 35, no. 4 (2001): 930-931.

term prospects for such a coalition to form.

The urban-rural cleavage is part of a broader set of difficulties leading to the lack of effective national alliances across interest groups. In the nonprofit and NGO community, especially among organizations doing rural or grass-roots work, effective alliances to drive national policymaking are rare. There are a few coalitions of interest groups, such as the Campaign for Popular Democracy and the Assembly of the Poor. However, these coalitions have problems with funding limitations, weak organizational structures, internal conflicts, and the lack of broad popular support, all of which often leave them unable to compete against more professional institutions such as the military. Thailand lacks any organization such as the American Association of Retired Persons, which has a large and dues-paying membership, numerous offices/branches, extensive media and lobbying divisions, and various proven ways to galvanize its membership on key policy issues or legislation.

Moreover, substantial fragmentation exists among labor and business groups. Despite a substantial increase in the number of workers in the manufacturing sector, the Thai labor movement has not come close to forming strong labor unions with a nationwide presence.²⁶ Though government efforts to keep labor unions from expanding account for much of this weakness, the lack of sustained cooperation among Thailand's labor unions adds to the problem. Other than some persistent protests against the privatization of state-owned enterprises (mainly the Electrical Generating Authority of Thailand), the labor movement has not capitalized on Thailand's rapid growth in manufacturing jobs to increase its membership. More importantly, labor leaders have not engaged in any meaningful discussions about forming a coalition along the lines of the Trades Union Congress in Britain or the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO). Regarding fragmentation among business and trade/professional associations, firms are not required (or even encouraged) to join peak associations and industries are allowed to have multiple representative associations.²⁷ Professional organizations, such as the Medical Association of Thailand, started to actively lobby the government only in the past five to ten years and have not moved beyond forming quite loose alliances focused on specific policy issues. It is true that business associations do not suffer the same degree of fragmentation as does the labor movement, as evidenced by the presence and activities of national-level organizations such as the Federation of Thai Industries, the Thai Bankers Organization, and the Thai

²⁶ See Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, "Background Note: Thailand," United States Department of State (August 2006), <http://www.state.gov> (accessed October 7, 2006). Employment in industry as a percentage of total employment increased from 10 percent in 1980 to approximately 20 percent by 2003. See World Development Indicators, <http://devdata.worldbank.org/dataonline/>.

²⁷ Anek Laothamatas, *Business Associations*, 92-93.

Chamber of Commerce. Even so, on issues regarding major political reforms and democratic progress, these types of organizations have not coalesced around any identifiable ideological stance and typically remain subdued when these issues come to the fore.

The above discussion of interest group fragmentation underscores the difficulties with energizing a social base—with mobilizing a mass movement. Thailand has never had a mass-based political party, a party which has held sustained parliamentary power and successfully challenged the supremacy of the military and (more recently) big business interests. The closest Thailand ever came to this type of party was the Communist Party during the mid-1960s and the 1970s, a movement the government successfully quelled by the early 1980s. In the process of formulating and passing Thailand's progressive 1997 constitution, various grass-roots development and prodemocracy groups had developed substantial political momentum that could have translated into a stable movement and perhaps a party. However, as one author wrote:

...the NGO cadre was not able to mobilise [sic] any significant forces in support of their reform agenda. Rather than mass protests the cadre used public forums and media campaigning to seek support of progressive sections of urban middle class. Lacking any powerful social base, the NGO democracy movement soon became an important, if subordinate, ally to the political reform movement that was emerging in the elite sector.²⁸

Why have interest groups failed to coalesce around any set of basic issues long enough and cohesively enough to form a viable, mass-based political party? Thai political parties have been transient groupings in almost all cases and (more importantly) not ideologically-driven. Nearly every major political party during the past two to three decades has lacked a clear ideological bent or an explicit party platform showing what it would do upon being elected. For many Thais, the only real party "ideology" is to obtain cabinet posts and use government power to further party members' personal financial and political interests. For many leaders in the interest group community, forming a party means entering the dirty business of politics. Thus, these leaders made almost no effort to form a party, especially many NGOs and grass-roots groups who see party politics as taking them away from their core objectives and tainting them in the eyes of those they work to help.²⁹ Yet, the experience of many

²⁸ Michael Kelly Connors, "Political Reform and the State in Thailand," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 29, no. 2 (1999): 206.

²⁹ Ji Giles Ungpakorn, "Challenges to the Thai N.G.O. Movement from the Dawn of a New Opposition to Global Capital," in *Radicalising Thailand: New Political Perspectives*, ed. Ji Giles Ungpakorn (Bangkok: Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 2003), 289-318.

countries with such parties (e.g., a “green” party in the Western European mold) suggests that a party such as this in Thailand could help break down the barriers to broader interest group representation in politics and push Thailand one solid step closer to full democratic consolidation.

Fourth, two facets of Thailand’s history have had an impact on interest groups and their role in democratization. One facet is that no country has ever colonized Thailand. Colonization generates anticolonial movements, which in many countries have evolved into powerful interest groups or social forces, even after colonization ended. As mentioned earlier, Kim has shown how South Korea’s powerful civil society coalition for democratization originated in the periods when the country was colonized by Japan (1910-1945) and experienced a major United States military presence after World War II. In particular, South Korea’s highly active labor groups arose in significant part from Japanese colonization and have played a major role in supporting many aspects of the country’s democratization.³⁰ In Thailand, with its lack of any anticolonial movement, interest groups with a tradition of confronting the political leadership and possessing a national cause (i.e., kicking out the colonizing power) did not arise. Seen in comparative perspective with other nations, Thai interest groups are quite civil and have shown a preference for less provocative or aggressive tactics than in other countries. This helps explain why democratic consolidation in Thailand is underway but only slowly, especially when civil society faces a challenge from a military leadership that is willing to use very aggressive tactics, including a coup.

Another facet of Thai history concerns the role of the monarchy and the great respect which Thais show toward the King and members of the royal family. The current military coup has helped to demonstrate how respect for the monarchy tends to quiet strong ideological sentiments and works against sweeping changes. There is also an element of fear among more radical Thai thinkers because a statement that can be construed as antimonarchical (e.g., proposing that Thailand change from a constitutional monarchy to a republic) can lead to a rapid loss of popular credibility and legitimacy. The presence of the monarchy reduces the chance that an ideologically-driven political movement—a Western European-style green party, a Latin American-style social movement, a coalition of interest groups seeking radical political reforms—will take hold. Even the one “revolution” in modern Thai political history—the 1932 shift from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy—lacked the depth of events such as the French Revolution or the Russian Revolution that swept away monarchies. And Thailand’s failed communist movement from the 1960s and 1970s faced immense challenges from entrenched powers that often asserted they acted for the nation, religion (i.e., Buddhism), and the King. The

³⁰ Sunhyuk Kim, “South Korea,” 138-163.

current coup leadership has closely associated the coup with support for the monarchy, thus conjoining opposition to its rule with opposition to the King. This has clearly helped to limit domestic challenges to the coup leadership and affected the democratization process.

Conclusion

In sum, there are four areas in which the limitations of Thailand's interest group community has played a role in the success of the military coup, while significantly slowing the pace of democratic consolidation: (1) the imbalance of power between the state and interest groups remains highly skewed toward the government; (2) much of the interest group community lacks enough autonomy from the state to effectively promote political reforms; (3) interest groups are fragmented in ways that create major obstacles to forming national coalitions or political parties that support democratization; and (4) the proclivities of Thai history favor a strong monarchy and lack the influence of a colonial legacy.

The combined impact of these four limitations is the absence of a mass movement with the following two characteristics: (1) a clearly democratic ideology; and (2) a willingness to engage in the "dirty" business of politics by directly challenging the political elite in Thailand's key forum for political competition, parliamentary elections. In contrast, key interest groups in South Korea are either entrenched in nationally-viable political parties or have alliances with political parties that most voters understand. This helps explain why an event like Thailand's recent military coup is essentially unthinkable in South Korea. In the Philippines, the limitations associated with Thai interest groups operate but more weakly; for example, the strong Catholic Church has substantially more autonomy from the state than Thailand's Buddhist monastic order. Thus, the Philippines sits somewhere between Thailand and South Korea on the spectrum of democratic consolidation, barely able to contain its restive military's attempts to influence major political decisions.

The strengthening of Thai interest groups is already underway but will take many years to achieve even moderate results. For example, as various prodemocracy organizations ponder the circumstances surrounding the coup, they may start to coalesce into an alliance. Such an alliance could start to address the problems associated with the fragmentation of Thai interest groups but might require at least a decade to evolve into a viable political party. It is beyond the scope of this essay to speculate about what will occur as the post-Thaksin period continues. However, if the trajectory of interest group progress continues, future governments will have to contend with better organized and more active interest groups, regardless whether they have formed mass-based movements and/or political parties.

