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## Thailand's Lesson in Populism

By Stanley A. Weiss

BANGKOK — Four months after welcoming the bloodless coup here — the 18th military takeover in seven decades and blessed by King Bhumibol Adulyadej — Thais are showing signs of buyer's remorse.

Frustrated with the junta's delays in drafting a new constitution and bumbling of economic policy, the Bangkok intelligentsia and urban middle class that backed the September coup now fear they may have destroyed Thailand's fragile democracy in the name of saving it from the autocratic yet elected Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

But if the elite and middle class are looking for someone to share the blame for their predicament, they need only look in the mirror.

Rarely acknowledged here is that Thaksin was as much a symptom, as a cause, of deep divisions in Thai society. Yes, the billionaire-turned-politician was a classic populist who shamelessly exploited social, economic and class inequalities to win three elections and tighten his iron-fisted rule. But these fissures existed long before Thaksin and, if ignored, guarantee that Thailand, like other polarized societies, will remain easy prey for populist authoritarians.

"There has always been tension between Bangkok, the center, and the regions," says Surin Pitsuwan, a former foreign minister and opposition Democrat Party member of Parliament. "Rebellions have come and gone with Bangkok steadily gaining the upper hand." Indeed, even as they opposed military dictatorships, the urban middle class often applauded their rulers for stamping out peasant movements and ignoring protesting farmers.

Not even the Thai economic miracle of recent decades could spare the country from one of the world's highest income inequalities — the wealthiest 20 percent of Thais earn an estimated 60 percent of the nation's income and the poorest 20 percent earn less than 5 percent.

If, as U.S. Ambassador Ralph Boyce argues, the Asian financial meltdown of 1997 was "Thailand's Great Depression," then the landslide victory of Thaksin's new political party in 2001, like the 1930s New Deal coalition in the United States, radically realigned politics here.

Outraged by Bangkok's indifference as millions were thrust into poverty, and bolstered by a new democratic Constitution, Thailand's 80 percent rural majority and Thaksin's big business allies began sidelining the old guard.

But by pursuing free-trade agreements, overhauling government ministries and privatizing state-owned assets, Thaksin the globalist enraged vested business interests,

bureaucrats and labor unions. Then again, as a self-made man of Chinese descent from a rural northern province, Thaksin was unlikely to win the love of the native Thai elite who cherish the nonconfrontational "Thai way."

By championing huge infrastructure projects, debt relief and easy credit loans for rural villagers, "Thaksinomics" directly challenged King Bhumibol's "Sufficiency Economy" philosophy, a sort of Buddhist economics that espouses self-sufficiency and moderation.

The rural and urban poor clearly shared Thaksin's view that "democracy is a means, not an end." They revered his populist programs for boosting their incomes and slashing poverty and his war on drugs for restoring order.

Meanwhile, the country's urban middle class and vibrant civil society reviled Thaksin's cronyism, nepotism and despotism as antithetical to democracy, rule of law and human rights. So, apparently ignorant of the irony, they launched massive protests to enforce the old rule of Thai politics: the countryside elects the prime minister, but the capital kicks him out.

Now, any notion that the junta had egalitarian motives has been dispelled. To replace the Constitution they abolished, coup leaders envision a new charter that diminishes rural influence and have warned "farmers and laborers" to avoid politics. Thaksinomics is out and the king's "Sufficiency Economy" is in.

Meanwhile, Thais wait and worry, knowing that in Thai politics, as in Thai boxing, adversaries use every fist, foot, knee and elbow to dispatch their opponent. As he circles the region, Thaksin wages a media campaign suggesting a triumphant return. The junta counter-punches with every tool at its disposal to keep him off Thai soil and out of Thai minds. And with the beloved 79-year-old King Bhumibol in failing health and no clear line of succession, Thais of all classes agonize over who will referee in the difficult days ahead.

So while urban elites here may rejoice in the defeat in this round of the prime minister they despised, they ignore the roots of this fight at their peril. Elections in India and peasant protests in China show that neglected rural majorities will not go gently into that good night. And as we have seen with Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, Vladimir Putin of Russia and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran, it can be a small step from elected populist to antidemocratic authoritarian.

In Thailand and beyond, so long as a hungry crowd is cheering for a champion, Thaksin and his ilk will keep returning to the ring.

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