Thailand: Quo vadis?
The recession of democracy in the land of smiles

By Corinna Johannsen

Towards the end of the nineties, Thailand was widely perceived to be moving forward in terms of democratic development. In 1997, a new constitution, the People’s Constitution, had been adopted and prospects for democracy were rather good as Thailand’s new constitution was considered a model for the whole region of Southeast Asia. At this point in time, it was very much unanticipated that Thailand would suffer another severe setback in its democratic development. When Thaksin Shinawatra was elected Prime Minister in 2001, the scene changed dramatically: Thaksin contributed to the transformation of Thailand ‘from a beacon of democracy in Southeast Asia into another illiberal one-party state’ (Pasuk & Baker 2004: 240). His style of government was characterised by a persistent erosion of democratic structures and principles and consequently led to a gradual decline of democratic quality. When the military coup in 2006 put a sudden end to Thaksin’s second term in office, democracy subsequently broke down completely. Even though parlia-
mentary elections were held in 2007 and Thailand therefore formally returned to a democratic
system, the latest developments suggest that the Thai democracy is far from consolidated. Instead,
it remains rather fragile and unstable. The upcoming elections are thus significant for Thailand’s
democratic future.

These developments raise the question of what led to these events: How and why did a country
that was regarded a role model in terms of democratic development only little more than a decade
ago slide back into a fragile and unconsolidated political system that cannot be referred to as a
democracy without reservation? First of all, a general understanding of the phenomenon – the
recession of democracy – has to be established. According to Guillermo O’Donnell (1992: 19), a
distinction between ‘sudden deaths’ and ‘slow deaths’ of democracy has to be made. While the
notion of sudden death basically refers to coup politics, O’Donnell (1992: 19; 33) describes what
he terms slow death as ‘a progressive diminution of existing spaces for the exercise of civilian
power and the effectiveness of the classic guarantees of liberal constitutionalism’, as a ‘slow and
at times opaque’ ‘process of successive authoritarian advances’. In the end, this process will often
result in a repressive facade democracy.

In this context, the term recession of democracy refers to precisely that kind of dynamic process: A
gradual diminution of democratic quality which Andreas Schedler (1998: 97), similarly to
O’Donnell, describes as a ‘gradual corrosion leading to fuzzy semi-democracy, to a hybrid regime
somewhere between liberal democracy and dictatorship’. Therefore, in this context a recession of
democracy sets in when basic democratic rights and liberties are significantly abridged. This can
be the case for example when leaders do not respect constitutional boundaries on their leadership
but seek to expand their power beyond the constitutional framework. The deliberate and purpose-
ful exclusion of minorities from the political process would be another example for a diminution of
democratic rights and liberties. These are just two examples, there are, however, various ways and
forms in which a democratic recession can become apparent.

From this point of view, a recession of democracy can logically only occur in regimes that have
been categorised as democratic prior to these developments. Along with the widely accepted mi-
minimalist conception of democracy by Joseph A. Schumpeter (1980: 430), this means that at least
free and fair elections have been held. To make a judgement on democratic quality on this basis
however does not lead to suitable conclusions as there can be no measurement of a gradual dimi-
nution of democratic quality.

Therefore, a broader understanding of democracy has to be the basis for every analysis of democ-
Ratic quality. The conception of liberal democracy by Larry Diamond (1999: 10-12) provides such a
basis: Diamond does not concentrate solely on elections even though he too considers elections
the minimal requisite any regime classified democratic has to fulfil. He also emphasises the impor-
tance of civil rights and liberties as well as horizontal accountability, the rule of law and the su-
premacy of the constitution. This very extensive understanding of democracy therefore qualifies as
a basis to any analysis of democratic quality. Moreover, the recent developments in Thailand sug-
gest that a democracy cannot sustain itself – rather it has to be the political actors that have to
adhere to the democratic principles in order to fully consolidate democracy. In the case of Thai-
land, there are various powerful groupings – some with and some without a constitutional man-
date – which seek to exert their influence over the political process so as to determine the political
outcomes in their favour. If these political actors choose to act outside the democratic set of rules,
the democratic institutions are weakened. Political actors therefore are decisive for the success or
failure of a democratic political system as their actions can provoke a gradual diminution of democratic quality.

According to Samuel P. Huntington (1997: 8) it is the young democracies (meaning those that have just completed the transition from an authoritarian regime to a democracy) of the third wave of democratisation that are especially prone to an authoritarian backlash caused by their democratically elected leaders: 'With third wave democracies, the problem is not overthrow but erosion: the intermittent or gradual weakening of democracy by those elected to lead it.'

It does not necessarily always have to be the democratically elected leaders that contribute to the gradual weakening of democracy, though. Rather, it is the behaviour of the political elites that has significant influence on whether the consolidation of democracy fails or succeeds.

In this respect, it is especially the political elites that are of crucial importance. John Higley and Michael Burton (1987: 296) define political elites as ‘people who are able, through their positions in powerful organizations, to affect national political outcomes individually, regularly, and seriously. Elites thus constitute a nation’s top leadership in all sectors – […] including both “establishment” and “counter elite” factions'.

This notion of political elites is thus not restricted to elected political actors. It also includes powerful (veto-) actors (a term originally introduced by George Tsebelis, 2002) that do not dispose of a constitutional mandate such as the military for example. This rather extensive notion of relevant political actors ensures that also those cases can be considered in which it is not the elected political actors that are responsible for a set-back in terms of democratic development.

Douglass North, John Wallis and Barry Weingast (2009) developed a conceptual framework that focuses on the explanation of social change and involves the behaviour of political actors and elites. With respect to the political situation in Thailand, this concept seems to provide a good basis for the analysis of the political challenges that the country still has to meet. North, Wallis and Weingast (ibid.) distinguish between natural states or limited access orders and open access orders.

In natural states, political elites form a dominant coalition in order to preserve their interests and privileges. Natural states can also be considered limited access orders: The dominant coalition limits access to valuable resources such as labour, land and capital as well as to valuable activities such as trade and education solely to members of the dominant coalition. Limiting the access to these resources and activities in turn produces rents which function as a force holding the dominant coalition together. Elite groups thus agree to respect each others’ privileges, they support the regime and perform their specific functions. Moreover, they will refrain from using violence against each other because it is in their own interest to preserve the status quo. Natural states therefore maintain their dominant coalition by granting elite organisations and individual elites economic and political incentives to cooperate with one another. Consequently, all organisations such as military, economic, political, educational and religious organisations are structurally integrated into the dominant coalition. As a result, the members of the dominant coalition all specialise in a range of activities. The basis of a limited access order or a natural state are therefore personal relationships that are determined by the identity of the elite groups in the dominant coalition.
The benefits of the dominant coalition depend on the limited access that in turn is enforced by the regime. All elites strive to keep up this strategic situation because a failure to do so might cause violence and disorder and also a diminution of rents for the elites.

More generally, a limited access order is characterised by a slow-growing economy that is vulnerable to shocks, by polities that do not enjoy the general consent of the public, by a comparatively small number of organisations, by a small and more centralised government and by a predominance of social relationships which produces inequality in terms of the enforcement of laws, the instability of property rights and a tendency that not all individuals are equal (North et al. 2009: 12). This constellation seems very favourable to the members of the dominant coalition because it is mainly to their benefit.

In an open access order, the Weberian assumption of the state possessing the monopoly on the legitimate use of violence is satisfied. Basic requirements thus are that the military and the police forces are subject to civil control and a set of institutions that successfully constrains the political players and limits the illegitimate use of violence (ibid. 22). Violence is therefore limited through institutions that make violent behaviour unattractive by stipulating punishments for its abuse.

Open access orders are characterised by social and economic competition which determines the social relations. Also, open access to the economic system ensures that the political system remains separated: The manipulation of economic interests by political officials and an abuse of political power normally causes the political group to lose the support of the public. The political system in turn fosters competition and the government does no longer consist of a dominant coalition – instead the political process is open to participation and accessible to every citizen. The logic of the state has changed from creating rents through privileges to rent-erosion through free access.

Another central element of open access orders is impersonality. Identity is not defined by personal characteristics anymore such as race, class and religion but by a set of impersonal attributes such as education and competence that every citizen possesses to varying degrees. Impersonality also ensures equality: The formation of an organisation for example no longer requires the consent of the state – every citizen who fulfils a minimal set of impersonal characteristics now has the right to form an organisation. Furthermore, services and public goods such as infrastructure, education, public health and social security programs are provided by the government impersonally to all the citizens (this sentence reeks of socialism, id delete it – ok, agreed). Impersonality thus means the equal application of general rules to every citizen regardless of personal attributes, e.g. equality before the law and access to education.

Overall, open access orders are generally characterised by a high degree of political and economic development with the economy experiencing only little negative growth, a rich and diversified civil society, more effective, less centralised governments and widespread impersonal relationships that include the rule of law, the security of property rights and equality of individuals (ibid. 12). Today, only about 15 percent of the world’s population live in open access orders, the remaining 85 percent of the world’s population still live in natural states. The central question now is, how does a state make the transformation from a limited access order to an open access order?

According to North et al. (ibid. 25), conditions must arise that put elites in a position where they benefit from moving on to impersonal relationships amongst elites and sharing their personal privileges. Transitions therefore occur in two steps: Firstly, the relations among elites are trans-
formed from personal to impersonal relationships and secondly, these arrangements are then ex-
tended to the broader public. The creation of institutions that foster impersonality is an essential
precondition for a transition. North at al. (ibid. 26) account for three doorstep conditions: The rule
of law applying for elites too, perpetually lived? forms of public and private elite organisations and
consolidated political control of the military.

These doorstep conditions are the decisive factors that encourage a transition from a *limited ac-

*cess order to an *open access order by creating an environment that allows impersonal relation-

*ships to unfold. The rule of law in a way ensures the elites of their equality and thus benefits them
as they can now rely on a legal protection in case of conflict. The newly introduced forms of per-

*petually lived organisations increase the range of economic and political activities that the elites

can engage in. Lastly, a consolidated control of the armed forces liberates the elites of the need to
create and maintain alliances for their own protection in case disorder or violence break out.

However, in practice, a process of transition takes a rather long period of time as the empirical
research conducted by North et al. has shown: The transition itself takes about fifty years but the
preparatory events that make a transition only possible often take centuries (ibid. 27).

The question now is: How does this relate to the political situation in Thailand? Has Thailand al-
ready made the transition to an *open access society or does it rather have to be considered a *lim-

*ited access society? And how does this conceptual framework contribute to the explanation of the
political crisis that Thailand has been experiencing over the last decade?

This analysis concentrates on a time frame beginning with the election of Thaksin Shinawatra as
Prime Minister, thus from 2001 to the present day. The period before 2001, namely from 1997 to
2001, can be considered as a phase of democratic consolidation – especially with the adoption of
the "People's Constitution". Not only the constitution itself but also its drafting process has been
considered the most democratic in the history of Thailand. The 'Democrat-led government that had
taken over from the NAP [New Aspiration Party] completed the full term of parliament, the first
government ever to do so' (Case 2001: 532). Overall prospects for the development of democracy
in Thailand were therefore generally very positive towards the end of the 1990s.

When Thaksin was elected Prime Minister in 2001, the generally observed positive trend seemed to
come to a halt. The Parliamentary elections of 2001 were the first elections to be held under the
new constitution. Thaksin's newly-founded Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party won the majority of seats in
an exceptional landslide victory (Croissant 2008: 22). The effects were a novelty in Thai history:
'This gave the Thai Rak Thai party unprecedented bargaining power in forming the government,
choosing a cabinet, and in pushing its policies through parliament' (Ockey 2003: 668).

Thaksin, a well-connected and successful businessman, was no stranger to politics: During the first
Leekpai-administration, he served as a Foreign Secretary of State and later, during the Chavalit-
administration, he became Deputy Prime Minister. After Chavalit resigned, Thaksin founded his TRT
party. Programmatically, Thaksin's election campaign was especially directed at the rural popula-
tion in the North and Northeast of Thailand. By promising farm workers a three-year moratorium
of their debts, a new credit-scheme that was to provide each of the villages with 1 million Baht
and a state-funded health programme, he assured himself of their support. Many observers have
referred to this strategy as populist – something that was entirely new to Thai politics: 'This was
so new that a Thai term had to be invented, while Thai academics helpfully wrote press articles to
explain populism's meaning and history' (Pasuk & Baker 2004: 8). Nevertheless, it was not only the
rural people who felt attracted by Thaksin's electoral promises: The urban lower middle class as well as entrepreneurs also responded positively to Thaksin's policies, as they were looking for state support in the immediate aftermath of the Asian financial crisis.

After Thaksin's taking office, it did not take too long until his style of governing began to show: He proceeded to systematically undercut and weaken the democratic institutions and bodies by placing close associates in major key positions – a practice not entirely new to Thailand but perfected under Thaksin. Thaksin also declared political parties, interest groups and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) unnecessary: ‘Did not his government already serve the people effectively?’ (Pasuk & Baker 2005: 66). Moreover, Thaksin started to effectively restrict the freedom of the press: ‘The Thaksin government was widely criticized for putting pressure on critical media voices – such as the English-language daily The Nation and the small but outspoken Thai-language daily Thai Post (McCargo 2007: 6). Adding to all this was the violation of human rights during the war on drugs and in the conflict with the Malay separatist's movement in the Southern provinces.

Towards the end of his first term in office, Thaksin thus had succeeded in eroding all the mechanisms of horizontal control – a system of checks and balances was no longer existent. Voters seemed to care little though, as Thaksin's TRT party won the parliamentary elections again in 2005 with an overwhelming majority. His populist policies and personal style were just too popular. In the face of this electoral victory, there were hardly any parliamentary means left for the opposition to exert its controlling function. Thaksin had managed to install himself as the sole ruler, unchecked and unbalanced by any constitutional body. His version of democracy therefore very much corresponded to a delegative democracy as described by Guillermo O'Donnell (1994).

Regarding the elite structure of Thailand during this process of democratic recession, two opposing factions have revealed themselves: The traditional elite and the new elite.

The traditional elite, in North et al. terms, “the dominant coalition”, primarily consists of a royalist and conservative military and bureaucracy and is mainly Bangkok-based, whereas the new elite is composed of newly successful urban businessmen. It is important to note that this classification is not static, there is no “black” and “white” and it would be misleading to believe that those who support the traditional elite only live in the centre (Bangkok) and those who support the new elite solely live in the rural areas. The new elite challenged the traditional elites in many ways even before the 2001 election. But until 2001 the dominant coalition was able to exert a certain hegemony on the political development of the country. With the election of Thaksin Shinawatra clearly a representative of the new elite came to power through the electoral process for the first time.

These developments suggest that after 2001, there has been no coherent dominant coalition because Thaksin was certainly not a part of the dominant coalition formed by the traditional elite. Even though North at al. (2009: 37) state that limited access orders are not closed access orders, they emphasise the need of rising through patron-client networks which in turn limit the access. Thaksin however did not make use of such networks for his rise: Rather, it was the democratic electoral process that benefited him. This in turn raises the question whether Thailand has to be classified as a natural state or as an open access order. A closer look at the intra-elite relationships therefore seems to be appropriate.

As the political institutions serve to structure and frame the elite behaviour in the political game, a brief examination of the constitutions of 1997 and 2007 can be helpful. It is especially their
drafting process that is of interest in this respect. A constitution represents the highest law in any country and its drafting process thus is of great importance for its legitimacy. This means that an exclusion of highly influential interest groups will very likely provoke them into disregarding the constitution as the country’s highest law. Rather they might try to accomplish their goals beyond the constitutional framework.

The constitution of 1997 was drafted by a democratically elected commission which represented all influential elite factions and interest groups. Even though the constitution was highly contested among its drafters it finally was adopted and came into effect. It is indisputable though that the Asian economic crisis served as a catalyst: Without it the constitution probably would not have been adopted. Hence, the constitution of 1997 resembles an elite convergence – the political elite found itself face to face to a major economic crisis. This led to a temporary elite convergence which was solely aimed at mastering the effects of the economic crisis and creating an appearance of legitimacy to the public. It could also be considered a temporary ceasefire in the face of bigger challenges that affected all political elites mutually. However, after the effects of the crisis had been dealt with, the political elites slowly dissociated themselves from each other and they reverted into competition mode again.

Nevertheless, the regime stability was remarkably high during the period from 1997 to 2005. Actually, no regime before had ever been as stable as the governments under the 1997 constitution turned out to be. After the government led by Chavalit had stepped down in October 1997, a new government led by the Democrat Party (DP) was formed. It was the first government ever in Thailand’s history to complete a full term in office. When Thaksin was elected in 2001 and re-elected in 2005, this again was something completely unprecedented: Never before had a government not only completed its full term in office but then also been re-elected.

With Thailand’s history of numerous military coups, the country seemed to have made some significant progress towards democratisation during this period. Regardless of these prospects, Thailand could not yet be considered an open access order: It did not fulfil the basic conditions of open access to political and economic organisations and impersonality. However, with the constitution of 1997, Thailand seemed to have made a first step on the way to an open access order by creating the necessary institutions that would in turn produce the doorstep conditions for a transition.

This assumption however is a fallacy: Due to the Asian economic crisis of 1997 political elites of all factions were under great pressure. The task to find a solution to the massive economic crisis became more important than the struggles of the day to day politics, so the elites temporarily ‘united’ to master that task. It would be incorrect however to assume that the crisis led to an elite transformation as their unification was strictly temporary and ended soon enough when the effects of the crisis started to fade.

With the re-election of Thaksin Shinawatra as a Prime Minister in 2005 people started to voice their concerns by protesting against the government and demanding that Thaksin resign. When Thaksin in February 2006 instead engaged in a dubious business deal which involved the alteration of a law, criticism of his style of government grew even more outspoken. As a result, Thaksin called for snap elections. The TRT won the elections again but the opposition parties (most importantly the DP) had decided to boycott the elections by not participating. Finally, after an audience with the King, Thaksin resigned from office but still served as an interim Prime Minister – new elections had been scheduled for October 2006.
However, in September 2006 the military staged a coup and thereby ousted Thaksin from office who subsequently went into exile. According to the military, there were four reasons for their intervention: ‘Thaksin’s meddling with democratic institutions, his unprecedented polarization of society, his actions bordering in lèse majesté, and his corrupt behaviour’ (Kuhonta 2008: 374).

By staging a coup, the military once again proved to be a very powerful veto-actor in the Thai political system. Civil control over the military – one of the basic characteristics of open access orders – obviously had not been established. According to North et al. (2009: 21), a military coup is the typical result of an imbalance in the intra-elite relationships in natural states: If new and powerful interests arise and the structure of the dominant coalition changes, the distribution of privileges has to be renegotiated. If these renegotiations fail and the parties misjudge each other's capabilities in terms of violence it is likely that they will no longer refrain from using violence to protect their interests and prevent policies they do not support. In Thailand, the military coup followed exactly this scheme: The traditional elite felt threatened by Thaksin's power grab – they feared for their privileges. Thaksin however completely misjudged his situation and his power, having placed close allies in significant key positions, even in the military.

The reason why the traditional elites did not move to overthrow Thaksin's government during his first term in office even though they suspected him already back then of being a potential threat to the monarchy and their power in general, was that he was rather popular and even had good relations with the royalist camp. This changed in 2006: Thaksin's style of leadership had deeply divided the country. The so-called war on drugs and the resulting violation of human rights as well as Thaksin's increasingly tight grip on power alienated especially the urban elites and the middle class. When Thaksin was alleged to have engaged in a dubious business deal he lost a lot of his popularity, making it possible for the military to stage a coup against him. The temporarily masked but still existing elite struggles now became a priority in Thai politics again.

Also, the masses became increasingly involved with 2005 marking a turning point: Until then there had been no mass mobilisation but with the re-election of Thaksin protests against his style of leadership started. In 2006, protests broadened into a true mass mobilisation. In addition, the polarisation of society became more and more visible. The mass protests involved not only Thaksin's adversaries who teamed up in the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) but also his supporters, the so-called 'red shirts', who went onto the streets to show their support for Thaksin. The protest finally culminated in April 2010: Thailand had not seen clashes this severe since 1992. Confrontations between protesters and security forces resulted in 91 death casualties and hundreds of injured people. Negotiations between opposition forces and the government failed repeatedly and security forces then proceeded to break up the protests. The government declared a state of emergency that was held up for eight months in Bangkok and that barred any gathering of more than 5 people.

What followed the military coup was more than one year of military governance that ended when the military first put a new constitution to vote by means of a referendum in August 2007 and then called for new Parliamentary elections in December 2007.

When the TRT's successor party, the People's Power Party (PPP), won the elections of 2007, Samak Sundaravej became the new prime minister. He was soon ousted though when the Constitutional Court decided his engagement in a TV cooking show was illegal. His successor, Somchai Wongsawat stayed in office until December 2007: The Constitutional Court then ruled that the PPP was guilty of electoral fraud and therefore had to be dissolved. In the aftermath of these events, there
was a wide-spread concern that the military would stage another coup to stabilise the situation. However, the DP and their coalition partners managed to convince the military leadership that they could handle the situation: Abhisit Vejjajiva (DP) was elected new prime minister by the Parliament and has been struggling to solve the political crisis ever since.

As a result, regime stability in the period after 2006 has been extremely low. Not only that Thailand has had three Prime Minister since the last elections in December 2007, it also seems the judiciary is becoming increasingly politicised: The Constitutional Court had to rule on the dissolution of the governing party twice. The first case involved the PPP and led to its dissolution whereas the second case only lately involved the DP. The allegations were not similar, however: The PPP had been accused of outright electoral fraud, while the DP had ‘merely’ misused EC funds. However, the case against the DP was dismissed in November 2010 due to technical flaws during the legal procedure. It is interesting to note though that the Constitutional Court never made a statement on the content of the allegations but simply rejected the case on technical grounds. The DP, which can be regarded part of the traditional elites, therefore remained in power.

Looking at the constitution of 2007 strengthens the impression of the traditional elite rebuilding their power and securing their privileges. The constitution of 2007 was drafted by a mainly appointed commission that was under the influence of the military. All other elite factions had been left out altogether. By choosing to submit the new constitution to the people by means of a referendum, the military government tried to create an appearance of legitimacy. Considering the circumstances of the referendum there actually was no such legitimacy: Those opposing the new constitution were not allowed to speak up freely – they were imprisoned instead. Therefore the drafting process as well as the referendum could not provide the constitution with adequate legitimacy. The constitution of 2007 thus cannot be regarded as the institutionalisation of impersonality: It mainly reflects the traditional elite's interests, secures their privileges and is aimed at consolidating their power in the dominant coalition. The successor parties of Thaksin's TRT have since made several unsuccessful attempts to amend the constitution in their favour. The instauation of the 1997 constitution has also been an essential demand by the ‘red shirts’.

So far, the traditional elite in Thailand was rather successful in forming and maintaining a dominant coalition even though their power has been and still is challenged by the new elites. As long as there's no consensus among the warring elite factions it seems improbable that the recession of democratic values can be stopped. Only the institutionalisation of impersonality and an open access to economic and political organisations can guarantee a stable (and democratic) political system in the long run.

Apart from this, it is important to note that the gap between supporters of Thaksin and his adversaries cannot be reduced to a gap between urban and rural areas. Instead, the gap often divides even families or once close friends. It is, however, true that Thaksin Shinawatra was and is extremely popular among the poor population of the Northern and North-Eastern regions. This is due to his election campaign which was directed at exactly these less privileged parts of the population. Thaksin was the first to discover and recognize their value in terms of vote-casting – his populist promises attracted many of these voters. After being elected, Thaksin actually kept his word which was a novelty as well. He implemented many of the reforms he had promised to benefit the poor population. This in turn assured Thaksin of their enduring loyalty. Nevertheless, it would be false though to assume that Thaksin draws his supporters solely from the Northern and North-Eastern regions. Indeed, Thaksin succeeded in also persuading the urban middle class who felt neglected by the traditional elite especially in the aftermath of the Asian economic crisis that
his election would be to their benefit. The struggle between these two elite factions that has led
to the current political crisis is therefore not a struggle between the rich and the poor, the centre
and the periphery but rather a struggle that crosses social boundaries. It is important to point this
out because it puts things into a different perspective: The only solution to this struggle is a dra-
matic change in the intra-elite relationships and finally a transformation from a limited to an
open access order.

The key question however is that even if the differences between traditional and new elites could
be settled for now, how will the results of the upcoming elections turn out? At this point in time,
the result is hard to predict: The government coalition parties seem confident to win the elections
not least because of the introduction of a number of policies aimed at winning the votes of the
poorer strata of the population. Nevertheless, Thaksin’s popularity remains unbroken amongst his
supporters, so there is also a good chance that Thaksin’s successor party, the Pheu Thai party, will
win. Their chances especially seem to have increased since the party announced its top candidate:
Thaksin’s sister. Thaksin himself has declared that his younger sister is “his clone” saying that she
is “like him” in terms of sharing the same attitude, ideas and thinking and not his puppet (Bangkok
Post, 31st May 2011). Yingluck Shinawatra has been touring the country since and publicly an-
nounced that she would do whatever her brother judges best for the country. Thus, she implicitly
admitted of being her brother’s puppet although she denies this vehemently in her statements.

With that, a more pressing question arises: What will happen if the next government is dissolved
under some pretence again? This is exactly the core of the problem: As long as the elites can’t
seem to settle on a consensus, as long as the result of democratic elections is not respected by
either side, the struggle will most certainly continue. Moreover, chances for a reversal of the po-
larisation of society grow smaller as distrust and even hatred increase. Even though Thailand has
formally returned to a democratic political system in 2007, certain basic democratic values such as
vertical accountability and the freedom of speech are compromised.

Furthermore, it is the institution of elections that needs to be observed closely: Elections produce
different outcomes depending on whether they are held in open access societies or in limited ac-
cess societies. Thus, elections alone cannot be considered a means to produce democracy. Rather,
it is the circumstances that determine an election’s meaningfulness. In an open access order that
allows an open political competition, the electoral outcome can be assumed to be significantly
more meaningful than in a limited access society where only limited political competition – if at
all – is tolerated. Even though Thailand has not yet made the transformation from a natural state
to an open access order, political competition can be considered rather open. However, it is subject
to some restrictions. The main conditions limiting the political and electoral contest are the re-
strictions on freedom of speech and press freedom. Nevertheless, the establishment of parties is
generally free and open to the public. Hence, there are a lot of parties participating in the elec-
tions and the Thai party system is rather fragmented and volatile. The electoral outcome can
therefore be considered as unpredictable and thus meaningful. The former is especially true when
one looks at the latest developments: Several polls and surveys conducted by various institutions
predict a close call between the governing DP and the opposing Pheu Thai party. According to a
poll by the Assumption University, the largest group of voters is still undecided. The core of the
problem in Thailand thus is not the electoral process itself even though corruption and vote-
buying remain a crucial factor. The questions rather are in the short run whether the vertical ac-
countability – the voter’s decision – will be respected and in the long run how the intra-elite rela-
tionships will evolve.
Literature and sources:

Bangkok Post (31.05.2011): *Thaksin admits Yingluck his 'clone'*.  


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