

Legitimacy and effectiveness in Thailand, 2003–2007: perceived quality of governance and its consequences on political beliefs

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This article investigates the political attitudes of Thai citizens, who have been exposed to a harsh political climate in recent years. Two questions we address here are: (a) how people perceived the quality of governance under the Thaksin administration and the subsequent provisional military government, and (b) what impacts, if any, the populist style of politics as well as the military coup have had on the political beliefs of the Thai population. The statistical analysis based on *AsiaBarometer Survey* data locates a plunge in public perception that occurred during the period between the Thaksin era and the military government, but it also reveals that the difference is largely a product of inflated populist policies, and that people's commitment to a democratic system was already fragile before the coup.

1 Introduction

On the night of September 19, 2006, the Thai military leaders, who were to call themselves 'the Council for Democratic Reform under Constitutional Monarchy', staged a coup, interrupting the already started re-equilibration

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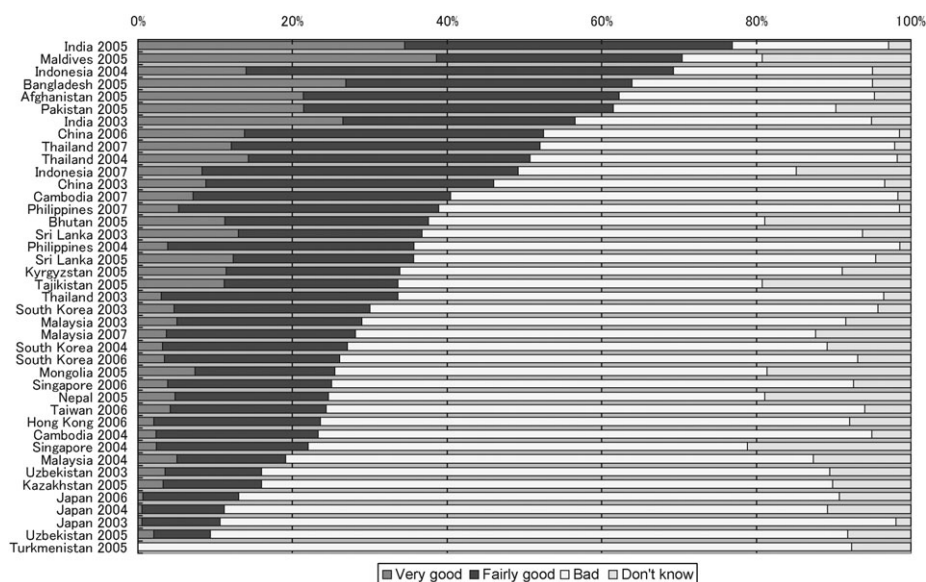


Figure 1 International comparison of the popularity of military regime in Asia. Question: 'Please indicate... whether you think (military government) would be very good, fairly good or bad for this country (SA). Source: AsiaBarometer 2003–2007.

process toward democracy under the aegis of the Constitutional Court. At the time of writing (July 10, 2008) the general election set for December 23 under the military-drafted constitution is supposed to bring the country back into the camp of democracy.

Aside from the next possible move by the military, or the actuality of the demand for military intervention at the time of constitutional crisis, one might want to know above all why democracy broke down in Thailand, or, as the target of the coup himself put it, why such an anachronistic measure as a military coup could have happened under the supposedly coup-proofed Constitution.¹ Several explanations have already been submitted. Case (2007), for example, attributes the final breakdown of the democratic regime in Thailand to the low quality of democracy that political elites as well as mass-level constituencies indulged in, while Freedman (2006) points out that the tendency to give priority to economic growth made a mockery of the 1997 reform. Still others (e.g. McCargo, 2002) predicted the political impasse that the demanding system of the 1997 Constitution could invite. We also have some empirical evidence of fragility of Thai democracy, which shows, as compared with other countries in Asia, the percentage of people who consider military rule desirable to be relatively high in Thailand (Figure 1).

¹ The 1997 Constitution specifically forbids any extra-constitutional acquisition of power (Article 63) and encourages citizens to resist if such an event should happen (Article 65).

These and other factors might well have contributed to the failed democracy in Thailand. However, there is one other important question: What did the Thaksin administration and the ensuing military coup mean for ordinary people? And what impact did these episodes have on popular political attitudes? Given the traditionally ambiguous nature of the Thai political system, even for area experts, we cannot *a priori* assume that people share some specific perception of the type of political regime. Their perceptions are essentially unknown and must be investigated. Also, if we are to understand the type of governance from bottom-up perspectives – that is, if we consider that the differences in the types of political regimes in general take on a substantive meaning only when they are perceived by those who not only govern the state but also those who are governed – there is no way to ignore what ordinary people think of politics.

Therefore, we do not, in this paper, address the question why democracy in Thailand was not consolidated. Rather, we try to measure the changes, if any, in the popular political attitudes that were brought about by a series of events. Specifically, using *AsiaBarometer Survey* data in 2003, 2004 and 2007,² we describe how citizens in Thailand evaluated the performance of the Thaksin administration and how they evaluate that of today's military regime; how they considered and consider their own political effectiveness before and after the coup; and whether there are any differences in the degree of trust in political institutions and of commitment to a democratic political system. Although lack of data for 2005 and 2006 limits our inference, the fact that the *World Values Survey* has not included Thailand as a target country, the three surveys conducted by the *AsiaBarometer* project provide the only scarce clues to understand Thailand's political culture during this tumultuous period.

The paper is structured as follows: the next section presents an overview of the ambiguous political history in Thailand, focusing especially on the competing interpretations about the developments after Thaksin and his party, Thai Rak Thai (TRT), took power through popular election in 2001. After that, we introduce five conceptual components of public perception and their internal relationships that can be measured through the *AsiaBarometer Survey*, and posit several hypotheses partly based on the Thai context and partly relying on preexisting studies. These hypotheses are tested through, first, simple comparison of frequency distribution of indicator questions, and second, more sophisticated technique of structural equation modeling with structured means of latent variables. The results show that although the political system experienced a sharper deterioration in the eyes of ordinary people between 2004 and 2007 than between 2003 and 2004, the differences are grossly biased by the populist policies. Also revealed is the somewhat worrisome fact that people's political

2 For more information on the *AsiaBarometer* project, visit the website at: <https://www.asiabarometer.org/>.

beliefs and attitudes have been in a state of flux since the Thaksin era. The final section serves as a summary of the results and notes, some implications on the prospects for democratic consolidation in Thailand.

2 Background: contentious interpretation of the Thaksin era and the coup in 2006

Politics in Thailand has traditionally been dominated by two key players: the King and the military. The latter's involvement in politics dates back to the 1932 coup while the former, as the original principal, remains politically active today compared with other constitutional monarchs in the modern world. After a decade of constitutional dictatorship and a short period of democratic rule following the end of WWII, the military established its enduring reign over Thai politics with the 1947 coup. Directly or indirectly, the military strongmen from Phibun Songkhram to Prem Tinsulanonda controlled the successive civilian governments behind a façade of constitutionality. On the other hand, the King played a pivotal role occasionally in critical junctures such as 1951 and 1973.³

The silent transformation of governance came under the Prem administration. Dubbed a 'demi-democracy' (Dhiravegin, 1992), the five successive governments presided over by Prem were essentially technocratic rule although they were extensions of the military government. Substantial policy-making was left to bureaucratic experts, whereas the popularly elected lower chamber was given consultative status. The military retained only veto power.

Although the bureaucratic authoritarianism (O'Donnell, 1979) had functioned well in Thailand, the steadily developing country was no exception to the third wave of democratization that also struck Asian countries. The 1988 general election, as a consequence of the no-confidence vote against Prime Minister Prem, paved the way for the genuinely elected government led by Chatichai Choonhavan of the Chart Thai Party. Despite the interruption by the 1991 coup, democratic rule was revived vigorously with an upsurge in popular support the following year, and survived the rest of the 20th century, even when faced with the economic crisis of 1997. Indeed, the catastrophe in 1997 is often said to have facilitated further democratization as represented by the adoption of the 'People's Constitution'.

The first general election since the adoption of the new constitution was held in 2001 and transformed, if only superficially, the notoriously fragmented party system of Thailand. A new party, TRT, led by the business tycoon, Thaksin Shinawatra, stormed onto the election scene, an unprecedented event in Thai history. The party gained a near absolute majority (248 out of 500 seats in the lower chamber), which is an unusually one-sided victory in Thai elections.

3 For more details of Thai history, refer Baker and Phongpaichit 2005 and Tamada 2003.

Furthermore, the strength of TRT kept increasing as the party absorbed smaller parties one after another. Through these tactics TRT secured about 75% of the seats by the next general election in 2005, which only confirmed the virtual monopoly over Thai politics by this real political entrepreneur.

The tide turned against him at the beginning of 2006, however, when the scandal on tax evasion in the sale of his family business came to light. His opponents were quick to organize protests against the corrupt government, demanding his resignation from office. As popular protests swelled in Bangkok, Thaksin called a snap election to demonstrate his popularity among people in local areas, which the leaders of opposition parties countered with boycotts, fearing the invincibility of Thaksin in election.⁴ The result was a Constitutional crisis, in which 38 seats remained vacant due to an inadequate share of votes required for non-competitive districts. Prompted by the King's intervention, the Constitutional Court annulled the election results and called a fresh election scheduled for October. However, the military, which had also been hostile to Thaksin, preemptively stepped in and physically removed him from office, rescheduling the re-equilibration process in its own way.

One possible interpretation of the story is that the democratic system, which had emerged from *dicta blanda* (O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986) in the late 1980s and had miraculously recovered from sudden infant death syndrome in the early 1990s, was finally forced by the military to close its haphazard history. This interpretation seems legitimate, given the two elections that gave TRT mandate were free and fair, although some irregularities such as traditional vote-buying marred the reputation (Tamada, 2003, pp. 280–283). Freedom House also seems to adopt this interpretation, changing the status of Thailand from 'partly free' to 'not free' in 2006.⁵ Yet another interpretation claims that deviation from democratic norms had already started in the Thaksin administration. From that perspective the 2006 coup is not the destruction of democracy but the restoration of democracy, which had been already degenerated into the 'CEO' dictatorship.

The military insists that the corruption and the abuse of power by Thaksin were the reasons for the coup. Although corruption is a standard excuse used by coup plotters around the world and hence does not merit consideration, the abuse of power can represent a fundamental deviation from democracy even from the viewpoint of the procedural definition. The three oft-mentioned undemocratic actions Thaksin took during his time in office are: (a) co-optation of neutral monitoring agencies such as Election Commission, the Constitutional Court, and the Bank of Thailand through personnel

4 Electoral law of Thailand required more than 20% of confidence vote in case of no-competition.

5 Of course, by changing the status from 'free' to 'partly free' in the previous year, the Freedom House rating was also an alert to the authoritarian tendency of the Thaksin administration.

control; (b) a series of harsh security measures, including the emergency law applied in the southern border provinces, that can threaten fundamental human rights; and (c) intervention into the media to stifle criticisms against his policies (Jarvis, 2002, p. 315; McCargo, 2002, p. 121; Mutebi, 2003, pp. 104–106; 2004, pp. 80–81; Freedman, 2006, pp. 183–185; Kazmin, 2007, p. 219; Case, 2007, pp. 631–632; Ockey, 2007, p. 134). Also, his expansion strategy, which chiefly relied on mergers and acquisition of competitors, can be seen as detrimental to a healthy functioning of democracy in that it reduces the viable alternatives for the electorate.

On the other hand, the present military regime, although it is fairly normal in the Thai context, is so liberal that we are nearly convinced of its claim as ‘the Council for Democratic Reform’. It is true that it used, at least, the threat of force to seize power, abolished the democratic Constitution, dissolved legislative branches, and restricted political activities. But the behavior was also welcomed by the King, the Privy Council, and the People’s Alliance for Democracy, the umbrella organization of parties opposing Thaksin. Martial law was lifted rather promptly in most parts of the country and the draft constitution, which is adequately democratic and is more sensitive to the possible abuse of power by the government, was submitted for referendum as promised. The general election is scheduled for December 23. Even the Freedom House assigns a score of 4 to Thailand’s civil liberties as against its political rights score of 7, recognizing that a certain degree of freedom is still observed by the present regime. All these events support the interpretation that what was destroyed by the coup is not democracy but a populist authoritarian regime, and that the present military regime is a prelude to what should be an ushering in of a more consolidated democratic period.

It is beyond our knowledge to unilaterally judge which interpretation is theoretically more consistent or whether there exists any other interpretation that is more convincing. It would also be absurd to conclude the debate solely from the top-down perspective. Rather, accepting that competing interpretations exist, in what follows we focus on how people in Thailand perceived and perceive the rapidly changing political situations and how their political attitudes have changed or remained unchanged after experiencing almost all types of political systems. Before analyzing the survey data, however, we have to disentangle some conceptual nexus surrounding political attitudes and then restate our questions in a series of testable hypotheses.

3 Hypotheses: components of public perception and their internal relationships

Political attitudes are, broadly speaking, feelings, and beliefs concerning politics, targets of which can range from specific policies, and politicians to

a more abstract topic such as the relationship between individuals and the state. Among various concepts that are studied in the name of political attitudes, however, evaluation of policy output, satisfaction with policy-making/implementation processes, sense of political effectiveness, trust in political institutions, and commitment to a democratic system (or authoritarian tendency) are central components that are almost always measured in most survey research, and are the ones that we also follow in this study. But we do not simply study these concepts mutually independently; rather we treat the five concepts as a value system that has certain internal relationships, which are hypothesized as follows.

First and foremost, people's evaluation of political processes should reflect to some extent the actual nature of the existing political regime. Anderson *et al.* (2002), using the *Central and Eastern Eurobarometer Survey*, have shown that citizens' perceptions of human rights conditions in a country are collectively related to that country's actual conditions of government repression, while Anderson *et al.* (2005) have found that citizens tend to have a more accurate (critical) perception the more highly they are educated. Therefore, this concept takes center stage as a barometer of Thai governance. However, as this variable is a subjective perception of policy-making/implementation processes, personal disposition concerning the type of regime naturally biases the evaluation. People who have a weaker commitment to a democratic system and have a stronger authoritarian tendency can ignore undemocratic aspects in the processes and overestimate the quality of governance even if the actuality is not that liberal. Satisfaction with policy-making/implementation processes may also be systematically inflated by the degree of satisfaction with the policy output, which in turn should vary according to whether he/she is one of the beneficiaries of the policies implemented by the present government. In the context of Thailand, where the Thaksin administration targeted the rural poor as its chief target in its populist campaign, lower household income of respondents is expected to exert a positive impact on satisfaction with policy output, which in turn can lead to an unduly positive level of satisfaction with processes. On the other hand, the reverse causality seems to be implausible, given the primacy of outcome over the process for most people.

Satisfaction with both processes and output can be the sources of trust in political institutions, as Mishler and Rose (2001) have empirically shown with data from the *New Democracies Barometer* and the *New Russia Barometer*. The causal arrow can also be drawn from output satisfaction to the sense of personal effectiveness in mass politics: the more satisfied people are with policy output, the more strongly they should be convinced that they have the power to influence national politics, because they witness realization of the policies they desired. In contrast, evaluation of political processes and sense of effectiveness are likely to be independent of each other because preference

articulation is one thing and government responsiveness is quite another thing. Likewise, the interrelation between political effectiveness and trust in political institutions can be safely ignored because people can trust political institutions as long as they perform well, regardless of the sense of control over these institutions, whereas people with a strong confidence in their own political effectiveness can be distrustful of political institutions if the organizations function inefficiently. As a possible consequence of institutional trust and sense of personal effectiveness, we rather expect effect on political actions such as voting, which are beyond the scope of this paper. Also, we do not expect institutional trust to cultivate support for a democratic system either, because trust in political institutions does not necessarily imply trust in *democratic* political institutions, given the indeterminacy of the type of regime in Thailand. The same is true for the otherwise possible influence of satisfaction with policy output, although Mishler and Rose (2005) have verified the linkage in the analysis of people in Russia. Rather, we treat commitment to a democratic system (or authoritarian inclination) as exogenous, a basic character trait learned early in life, or as Tsunekawa and Washida (2007) have shown using *Latinobarómetro* data, something determined by traumatic experience such as political violence. In our case, the coup is a possible factor that can trigger such dispositional changes.

With these internal relationships in mind, we examine whether differences in structured means of each components exist between different survey years. If, for example, the structured mean of the evaluation of policy processes in 2007 is statistically and significantly lower than that of the evaluation in 2003 or 2004, it implies that governance in Thailand deteriorated after the coup, or at least governance under the military regime is not good as the first term of the Thaksin administration. Similarly, by comparing structured means of sense of effectiveness or institutional trust, we can estimate the related changes in political beliefs. If, on the other hand, there is no statistically significant difference in structured means, it suggests that whether the country is ruled by a populist or by men in uniform does not matter much for ordinary people in Thailand.

To test these hypotheses, we employ the technique of structural equation modeling, which is depicted in Figure 2. Arrows and signs refer to the expected causality and directions of effect. The five components of political attitudes, which are shown in ellipses, are conceptualized as latent variables measured through the responses to the several related indicator questions shown in rectangles. (For more details on the wording of questions, see Table 1.) Note that commitment to a democratic system and sense of personal political effectiveness are reversed into authoritarian tendency and sense of ineffectiveness, respectively, due to the wordings of questions in the survey data. Also, the expected sign of effect of income on evaluation of output is negative because

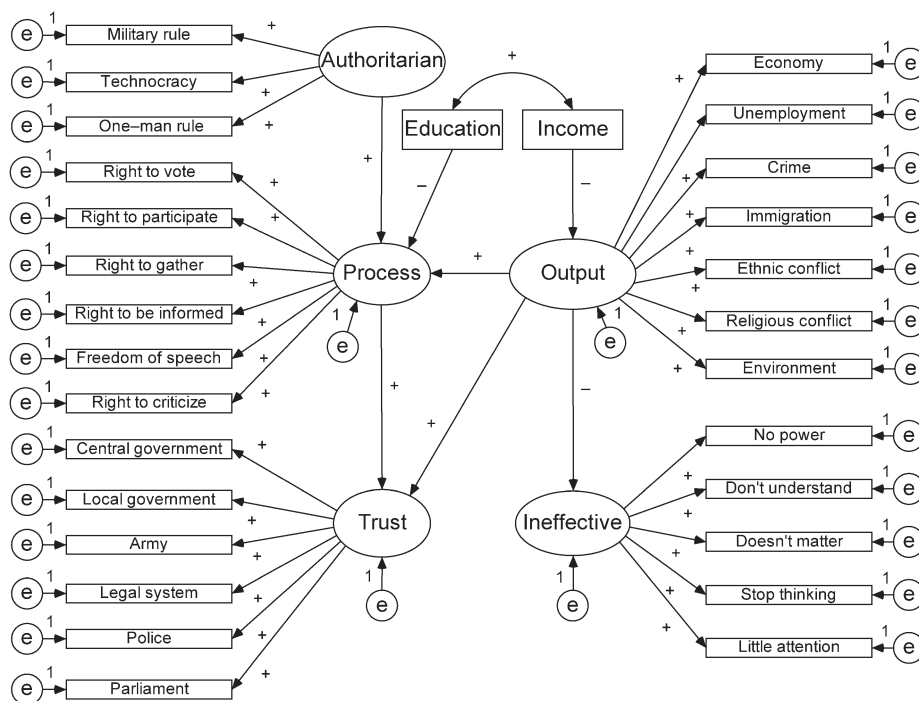


Figure 2 Hypothesized structure of political attitudes in Thailand. Positive and negative relations are represented by + and -, respectively. Latent variables are shown in ellipses, and observed variables are in rectangles. Authoritarian, authoritarian tendency; Education, the highest level of education respondents achieved (standardized); Income, household income level of respondents (standardized); Process, satisfaction with policy-making/implementation processes; Output, evaluation of policy output; Trust, trust in political institutions; Ineffective, sense of inefficacy; e, unique factors of indicators or error terms in the structural equation model. For details on indicator variables, see Table 1.

poverty is represented by lower value of income, which is expected to be positively correlated with another directly measured independent variable, education. Both income and education are standardized within each sample.

The source of survey data is the AsiaBarometer project, which has covered 29 societies in Asia (including Hong Kong and Taiwan) since its inception in 2003. Thailand was surveyed in 2003, 2004 and 2007, using nation-wide multi-stage stratified random sampling and face-to-face interview method. Sample sizes range from 800 in 2003 and 2004 to 1,000 in 2007.⁶ In the next section we present the results.

4 Results

We begin by describing frequency distributions of the indicator variables. Table 2 lists the proportions strictly positive (e.g. ‘strongly agree’ only) and

6 For the description of 2003 and 2004 surveys in Thailand, see Khamshoo and Stern 2005, 2006.

Table 1 Coding of latent variables

Latent variable	Indicator	Question wording and coding
Authoritarian tendency	Military rule	Millitary government
	Technocracy	A system whereby decisions affecting the country is made by experts
	One-man rule	Governance by a powerful leader without the restriction of parliament or elections
Satisfaction with politcal processes		How satisfied are you with the current scope of the following rights in [YOUR COUNTRY]? (SA for each right) very satisfied = 4, somewhat satisfied = 3, somewhat dissatisfied = 2, very dissatisfied = 1, don't know = missing value
	Right to vote	The right to vote
	Right to participate	The right to participate in any kind of organization
	Right to gather	The right to gather and demonstrate
	Right to be informed	The right to be informed about government
	Freedom of speech Right to criticize	Freedom of speech The right to criticize the government
Evaluation of policy output		How well do you think the [YOUR COUNTRY'S] government is dealing with the following issues? (SA for each right) very well = 4, fairly well = 3, not so well = 2, not well at all = 1, don't know = missing value
	Economy	The economy
	Unemployment	Unemployment
	Crime	Crime
	Immigration	Immigration
	Ethnic conflict	Ethnic conflicts
	Religious conflict Environment	Religious conflicts Environmental problems

Institutional trust		Please indicate to what extent you trust the following institutions to operate in the best interests of society (SA for each institution) trust a lot = 4, trust to a degree = 3, don't really trust = 2, don't trust at all = 1, don't know = missing value
	Central government	The central government
	Local government	Your local government
	Army	The army
	Legal system	The legal system
	Police	The police
	Parliament	Parliament
Sense of ineffectiveness		I am going to read out some statements about society and politics. Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each statement (SA for each statement) strongly agree = 4, agree = 3, disagree = 2, strongly disagree = 1, don't know = missing value
	No power	People like me don't have the power to influence government policy or actions
	Don't understand	Politics and government are so complicated that sometimes I don't understand what's happening
	Doesn't matter	Since so many people vote in elections, it really doesn't matter whether I vote or not
	Stop thinking	The people who are elected to the [NATIONAL PARLIAMENT] stop thinking about the public once they're elected
	Little attention	Government officials pay little attention to what citizens like me think

Note: Source: Asia Barometer 2003–2007.

Table 2 Proportions of positive responses to the indicator questions and their trends

	Questions	Answers	Proportion, %			Trend, %	
			2003	2004	2007	2004–2004	2004–2007
Evaluation of policy output	Economy	Very well	25.9	21.6	3.1	–4.3**	–18.5**
		Very well/fairly well	86.1	82.5	27.8	–3.6**	–54.7**
	Unemployment	Very well	5.4	13.3	2.9	7.9**	–10.4**
		Very well/fairly well	38.2	60.5	28.6	22.2**	–31.9**
	Crime	Very well	10.5	11.1	2.4	0.5	–8.7**
		Very well/fairly well	47.7	49.4	19.3	1.7	–30.1**
	Immigration	Very well	5.6	11.9	2.3	6.3**	–9.6**
		Very well/fairly well	34.1	53.6	27.2	19.5**	–26.4**
	Ethnic conflicts	Very well	7.0	4.6	2.1	–2.4**	–2.6**
		Very well/fairly well	49.3	39.8	21.5	–9.4**	–18.3**
	Religious conflicts	Very well	6.8	4.5	1.8	–2.3**	–2.7**
		Very well/fairly well	49.6	36.1	18.7	–13.5**	–17.4**
	Environmental problems	Very well	7.1	13.0	6.1	5.9**	–6.9**
		Very well/fairly well	52.3	70.8	49.2	18.5**	–21.7**
Satisfaction with political processes	Very satisfied	55.2	64.1	59.7	8.9**	–4.3	
	Right to vote	Very satisfied/somewhat satisfied	97.7	98.2	93.9	0.5	–4.2**
	Right to participate in any kind of organization	Very satisfied	28.3	24.4	21.8	–4.0	–2.6
		Very satisfied/somewhat satisfied	84.2	86.2	83.2	1.9	–3.0

		Very satisfied	30.0	27.1	22.6	−2.8	−4.6**
	Right to gather and demonstrate	Very satisfied/some what satisfied	84.9	84.0	78.3	−0.9	−5.7**
		Very satisfied	30.4	30.3	23.8	−0.1	−6.5**
	Right to be informed about government	Very satisfied/some what satisfied	80.1	82.5	75.0	2.4	−7.5**
		Very satisfied	31.3	24.1	18.1	−7.2**	−6.0**
	Freedom of speech	Very satisfied/some what satisfied	84.4	82.6	71.6	−1.8	−11.0**
		Very satisfied	25.2	19.3	17.3	−5.9**	−1.9
	Right to criticize the government	Very satisfied/some what satisfied	70.4	70.2	62.2	−0.2	−8.0**
Sense of ineffectiveness	No power to influence government policy or actions	Strongly agree	17.7	10.8	17.3	−6.9**	−6.6**
		Strongly agree/agree	67.1	56.4	65.2	−10.8**	8.9**
	I don't understand what's happening	Strongly agree	17.7	13.0	17.8	−4.7**	4.8**
		Strongly agree/agree	72.5	67.6	67.7	−4.9**	0.1
	It doesn't matter whether I vote or not	Strongly agree	4.3	1.3	4.8	−3.1**	3.6**
		Strongly agree/agree	19.6	8.3	22.2	−11.3**	13.9**
	People who are elected stop thinking about the public	Strongly agree	15.0	14.6	17.2	−0.4	2.6
		Strongly agree/agree	59.6	61.0	66.9	1.4	5.9**
	Government officials pay little attention	Strongly agree	12.2	11.2	19.6	−1.0	8.4**
		Strongly agree/agree	53.8	65.5	68.3	11.7**	2.8
Institutional trust	Central government	Trust a bit	34.1	25.5	8.9	−8.6**	−16.6**
		Trust a bit/trust to a degree	86.4	91.4	63.9	5.0**	−27.5**
	Local government	Trust a bit	11.1	24.2	14.9	13.2**	−9.3**
		Trust a bit/trust to a degree	59.7	89.7	79.1	30.1**	−10.7**

Continued

Table 2 Continued

Questions	Answers	Proportion, %			Trend, %	
		2003	2004	2007	2004–2004	2004–2007
Army	Trust a bit	36.6	44.2	28.8	7.5**	–15.4**
	Trust a bit/trust to a degree	88.3	93.0	83.2	4.7**	–9.8**
Legal system	Trust a bit	18.6	29.9	18.8	11.2**	–11.1**
	Trust a bit/trust to a degree	63.9	87.1	74.3	23.2**	–12.8**
Police	Trust a bit	8.6	15.5	11.1	6.9**	–4.4**
	Trust a bit/trust to a degree	41.3	73.2	64.7	31.9**	–8.5**
Parliament	Trust a bit	14.7	15.7	10.1	1.1	–5.7**
	Trust a bit/trust to a degree	65.4	83.4	62.6	18.0**	–20.8**
One-man rule	Very good	3.2	4.4	7.0	1.2	2.6**
	Very good/fairly good	17.0	28.1	26.3	11.1**	–1.7
Technocracy	Very good	19.3	19.0	13.0	–0.3	–6.0**
	Very good/fairly good	78.5	63.0	59.6	–15.5**	–3.3
Military government	Very good	3.4	14.2	12.3	10.8**	–1.9
	Very good/fairly good	33.4	50.1	53.0	16.7**	2.9

Note: Sample size: $n = 800$ (2003), $n = 800$ (2004), and $n = 1,000$ (2007).

Source: Asia Barometer 2003, 2004 and 2007.

** $p < 0.05$.

loosely positive responses (e.g. ‘strongly agree’ plus ‘somewhat agree’) to each of the questions and their trends between the three observation points in 2003, 2004, and 2007. All frequencies are adjusted by the weight variables based on the national demographic distribution such as gender and region.⁷ Therefore, if we assume that the questions have the same meaning for different years, the proportions should be roughly comparable. The right two columns give the difference between 2003 and 2004, and between 2004 and 2007, respectively. If discernible gaps exist between 2003 and 2004, it suggests that changes in political attitudes occurred during the Thaksin era. Conversely, differences between 2004 and 2007 were not necessarily caused by the military coup, but they indicate at least differences between the first Thaksin administration and the military government. Asterisks on the upper right of the figures mean that the difference is significant at 0.05 level.

To begin, people’s assessment of the policy outputs is fairly low for the military government. In no issue area did the majority of respondents positively evaluate the military government’s performance. In contrast, government performance under the Thaksin administration is highly evaluated by ordinary people. Take the difference in the evaluation of the economy for example. Although more than 80% of respondents approved, at least loosely, of the government economic policy in 2003 and 2004, the ratings plummeted by more than 50% in 2007. Although this tendency might not be surprising given the populist style of the former government, this sharp contrast in popular evaluations of policy outcome seems to be undeniable proof of Thaksin’s achievement.

Turning to satisfaction with the processes of policy-making/implementation, we still find relatively poor ratings for the military government. Although the majority of people continue to be relatively satisfied with most of the civil liberties under both regimes, in almost all aspects of political processes people’s satisfaction is decreasing. However, there are also other aspects worth noting: ‘very satisfied’ categories in freedom of speech and the right to criticize the government had significantly dropped already in 2004, indicating that people had noticed the mounting interference in the media by the Thaksin administration. Meanwhile, the public perception about the right to participate in any kind of organization remains about the same, which verifies the liberal character of the present government.

7 Despite the random sampling method employed in the surveys, slight discrepancies between the resulting sample compositions and census composition were unavoidable. The demographic data used to construct the weight variables are from Statistical Yearbook Thailand 2004 and 2007, National Statistical Office, Ministry of Information and Communication technology, available at <http://www.web.nso.go.th/eng/en/pub/pub.htm>. For the weight variables of 2003 and 2004, 2004 demographic data were used while for the weight variable of 2007, 2006 demographic data were used because demographic data of 2003 and 2007 were not available.

What about political beliefs and attitudes, then? First of all, people's self-effectiveness was significantly enhanced (percentages of people who agreed with the pessimistic statements about power and understanding of their own political role decreased) during the Thaksin regime. In the election campaign, TRT promised to grant one million baht to each of Thailand's 70,000 administrative 'villages' to promote economic diversification, to realize a 30 baht (less than one dollar) per medical visit scheme for medical care, and to give farmers a three-year moratorium on debt – and they kept their promise (Montesano, 2002, p. 91; Albritton, 2005, p. 170; 2006, pp. 141–142; Kazmin, 2007, p. 216). It is highly likely that these experiences contributed to people's improved confidence in their power to change politics. Also, as a part of this consequence, trust in political institutions generally increased during that period. In contrast, political skepticism and disinterest returned to 2003 levels after the coup, and trust in most political institutions also died down simultaneously. The fact that only trust in the media and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) did not significantly change from 2004 to 2007 (results not shown) suggests that delegitimation is not just an indiscriminate tendency but is a specific reaction to the coup.

Lastly, people's preference on the types of regime seems to have been affected more by the Thaksin revolution than the military coup. It was not after, but before, the coup that substantive and significant increase in the levels of loose support (i.e. including 'fairly good'), both for a one-man rule and for the military government, was marked. The coup experience does not seem to have degraded these undemocratic types of regimes, except for technocracy, which steadily lost popularity during the observed period. These trends suggest that some citizens, especially the beneficiaries of Thaksin policies, considered unfettered leadership desirable in order to accelerate the revolution while others, perceiving the possible danger that Thaksin politics might bring, felt the need to knock on the barracks' door. The coup appears to have occurred in such an already tense atmosphere that it had no noticeable impact on the people's regime preference.

Having directly observed the trends in indicator variables, we now apply the above-hypothesized structural equation model on these variables. We begin with the comparison of the structured means of the five latent variables. For that purpose, we first replaced all causal arrows among the latent variables with covariance and erased the four error terms connected to the four endogenous latent variables. After fitting the measurement model for each of the three samples (i.e. 2003-, 2004-, and 2007-year groups), we made minimum modifications to the original model so that sufficient model fit for every sample can be achieved. Specifically, we allowed unique factors to covariate if some commonality other than the common factor can be expected. For example, behind the statements – 'people like me don't have the power to

influence government policy or actions' and 'politics and government are so complicated that sometimes I don't understand what's happening' – we can assume the influence of respondent's low self-image other than political ineffectiveness. When one evaluates the government's policy on unemployment and on crime, it is plausible that one tends to consider unemployment as a cause of crime; the same is true for immigration and ethnic conflict, and so on.⁸ After confirming signs of the estimated regression weights are the same across groups, we proceeded to a simultaneous analysis for the three groups, first without any restriction (GFI = 0.916, CFI = 0.894, RMSEA = 0.27) and then imposing the same values for each of the corresponding coefficients and covariances except for the covariances among the five latent variables and the two directly observed independent variables (GFI = 0.910, CFI = 0.886, RMSEA = 0.27). Because the model fit was still sufficient, we further imposed the same intercepts for each of the corresponding indicator variables for the latent variables, so that we could compare structured means of the latent variables that are related to the indicator variables in the same way across different years (CFI = 0.786, RMSEA = 0.036). We chose the 2004-year group as a reference category and fixed the group's means of latent variables at zero while allowing other group's means of latent variables to be estimated freely.

Figure 3 shows the unstandardized parameter estimates. Figures above the indicator variables are the estimated common intercepts across the three groups, and those along arrows are the estimated common regression weights. Because all estimates included in the part of measurement model were statistically significant at 0.01 level, asterisks are omitted.⁹ Also, freely estimated covariances between the latent variables as well as directly observed independent variables are not shown for the sake of clarity of the diagram. What interests us here is the estimated structured means of latent variables in different years, which are listed vertically from 2003 to 2007 for each latent variable. (As noted, education and income are standardized variables and hence have zero means.)

Because the means in 2004 are fixed at zero, significant deviation from zero indicates whether the means in 2003 and 2007 are higher or lower than those in 2004. The results largely confirm the foregoing observation we made with the simple frequency table. First, the average authoritarian tendency among Thai citizens in 2003 is statistically and significantly lower than the average in

8 In this analysis, weight variables are not used, and missing values were list-wise deleted. Resulting sample sizes were: 601 for 2003, 627 for 2004, and 869 for 2007. Estimation is based on maximum likelihood. Model fits for each sample are as follows. 2003: GFI = 0.901, CFI = 0.870, RMSEA = 0.051; 2004: GFI = 0.920, CFI = 0.891, RMSEA = 0.043; 2007: GFI = 0.923, CFI = 0.911, RMSEA = 0.045.

9 For the sake of clarity of the diagram, we did not show the estimated values of variances of error terms, which are available from the author on demand.

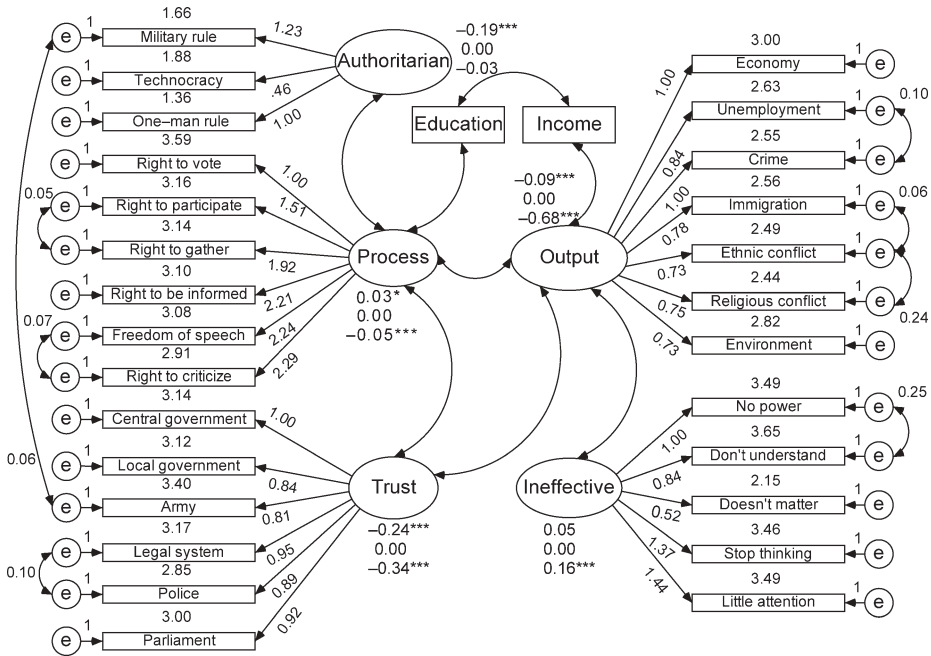


Figure 3 Structured means of the five components of political attitudes in different years. Top, 2003; middle, 2004 (reference category); bottom, 2007. Also reported are unstandardized common coefficients, intercepts, and covariances for measurement model. Comparative fit index = 0.786; root-mean-square residual = 0.036. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, and *** $p < 0.01$. All common coefficients, intercepts, and covariances for measurement model are significant at 0.01 level (asterisks omitted).

2004, whereas there is no difference in the level of authoritarian tendency between 2004 and 2007 samples. This finding suggests that the escalating populist politics by Thaksin, rather than the military coup, might have had a stronger psychological impact on the popular political inclination, even though the direction itself was not a desirable one. Second, the average evaluation of political processes in 2007 is explicitly lower than the average in 2004, whereas the average in 2003 is only slightly but statistically and significantly higher than the average in 2004. The result supports the interpretation that governance has been deteriorating already since the Thaksin era. Yet the average degree of satisfaction with policy output in 2004 is the highest among the three samples. Also, the average feeling of ineffectiveness in 2007 is statistically and significantly higher than the average in 2004, whereas no significant difference exists between the average in 2003 and 2004, indicating that people could feel a stronger sense of efficacy under the Thaksin regime than under military government. Last, the average level of institutional trust is highest in 2004, as is the case in the average satisfaction level with policy output.

Now, we go on to the analysis of causality between the latent variables. The same steps were followed as those in the foregoing measurement model. After

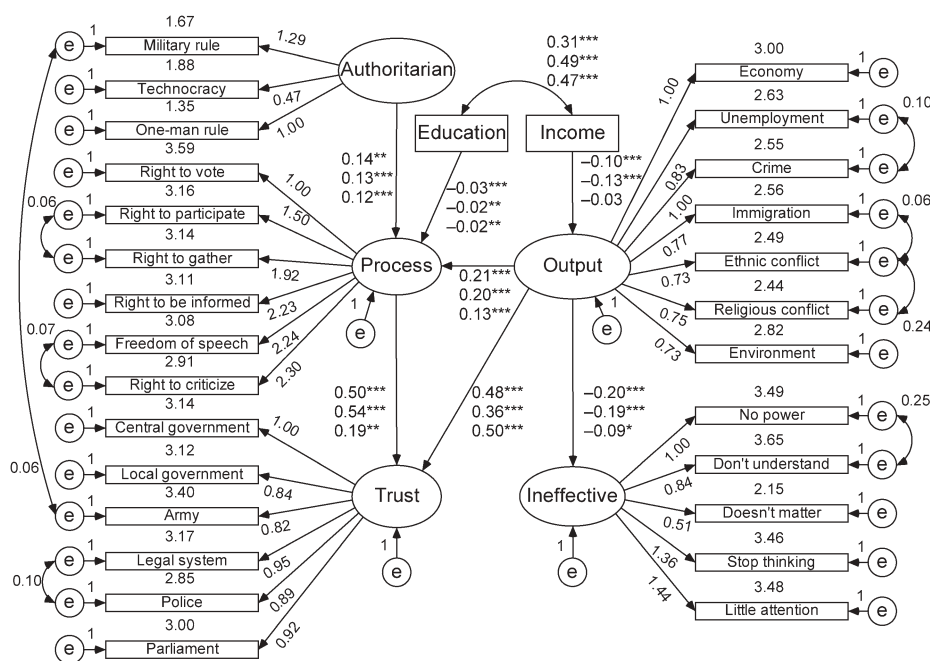


Figure 4 Unstandardized coefficients for structural equation model in different years. Top, 2003; middle, 2004 (reference category); bottom, 2007. Also reported are unstandardized common coefficients, intercepts, and covariances for measurement model. Comparative fit index = 0.793; root-mean-square residual = 0.036. **p* < 0.10, ***p* < 0.05, and ****p* < 0.01. All common coefficients, intercepts, and covariances for measurement model are significant at 0.01 level (asterisks omitted).

undoing the interrelations among the latent variables, we analyzed each group separately. Then we proceeded to simultaneous analysis, thereby increasing the restrictions on parameters step by step.¹⁰ In the final model with restriction on intercepts and means, we chose, as before, the 2004-year group as a reference category and fixed, at this time, the group's means of the exogenous latent variable (authoritarian) and the intercepts of the remaining four endogenous latent variables at zero, whereas allowing other group's means and intercepts of latent variables to be estimated freely.¹¹ Figure 4 shows the resultant estimates of the structural equation model (CFI = 0.793, RMSEA = 0.036). Note that the estimated factor loadings and the intercepts of indicator variables are

10 Model fits for each sample after modifications are as follows. 2003: GFI = 0.905, CFI = 0.878, RMSEA = 0.050; 2004: GFI = 0.926, CFI = 0.907, RMSEA = 0.040; 2007: GFI = 0.924, CFI = 0.912, RMSEA = 0.045. The simultaneous analysis without any restriction: GFI = 0.919, CFI = 0.901, RMSEA = 0.26. The model with the same values for each of the corresponding coefficients and covariances except for the internal relationships among the five latent variables and the two directly observed independent variables: GFI = 0.910, CFI = 0.886, RMSEA = 0.27.

11 By fixing the intercepts of endogenous latent variables at zero, we can fix their means at zero because the intercept represents the mean of dependent variable when all independent variables are zero, at which value all means of the independent variables are fixed in this analysis.

almost the same as those in the foregoing measurement model. Three values listed near each arrow between latent variables are the regression coefficients estimated for each group. (The first figure is for 2003, the second for 2004, and the third for 2007.) Similarly, estimates of covariance between education and income and the effects of these two directly observed independent variables are given for each year's sample.

As shown in Figure 4, interrelationships between the components of political attitudes fit our expectation. Authoritarian tendencies of respondents tend to make them overestimate political processes, while higher education levels lead to a more critical assessment. Satisfaction with policy-making/implementation processes is also induced by the satisfaction with policy output, which is largely a function of income level in the context of Thailand during the surveyed period. Note, however, that although the sign is still negative, the regression weight of the 2007 sample is no longer statistically significant by any conventional standard, which coincides with the transfer of power from the populist to the military regime. As expected, satisfaction with policy output reduces sense of inefficacy and increases trust in political institutions, the latter is also facilitated by higher satisfaction levels with policy-making/implementation processes.

Comparison of the structured means with and without control gives us further interesting insights. The first panel of Table 3 reproduces the estimated means in 2003 and 2007, included in Figure 3, and the second panel shows the artificial means if the levels of all other variables were equal to those in 2004 (i.e. zero). First, the structured means of authoritarian tendency and of satisfaction with policy output vary little, even if other variables are controlled for. This is natural because, first, authoritarian tendency is an exogenous variable in this model, and second, the average income level, which is the sole independent variable that affects the indicator (public perception) of policy outputs, does not change from zero (due to standardization within sample). Even if we do not control for other variables, the differences of these two latent variables from year to year reflect solely the changes in their averages themselves.

In contrast, the remaining three latent variables are, as shown in Figure 4, significantly influenced by other variables. The average level of satisfaction with policy processes in 2007 is a case in point. If the levels of authoritarian tendency and of satisfaction with policy output were equal to the levels in 2004, the average level of satisfaction with policy processes in 2007 is rather higher than the average in 2004 (=zero). Given the constant average of education in every year and the statistically indistinctive level of authoritarian tendencies in 2004 and 2007, the striking contrast between the average evaluations of policy processes with and without control can be chiefly attributed to the plunge in the average satisfaction with policy outputs in 2007 and not to the relative quality change in the processes themselves. Likewise, the increased

Table 3 Comparison of the structured means of latent variables with and without control for the Internal Causal Relationships

	2003			2007		
	Estimate	SE	<i>p</i>	Estimate	SE	<i>p</i>
Without control						
Authoritarian	−0.191	0.025	0.000	−0.027	0.024	0.263
Output	−0.088	0.032	0.007	−0.677	0.033	0.000
Process	0.026	0.014	0.073	−0.054	0.014	0.000
Ineffective	0.052	0.033	0.119	0.155	0.031	0.000
Trust	−0.241	0.029	0.000	−0.340	0.028	0.000
With control						
Authoritarian	−0.187	0.025	0.000	−0.025	0.024	0.282
Output	−0.087	0.032	0.007	−0.680	0.032	0.000
Process	0.071	0.020	0.000	0.038	0.019	0.047
Ineffective	0.034	0.033	0.305	0.095	0.044	0.029
Trust	−0.213	0.027	0.000	0.013	0.038	0.730

Note: Reference category is 2004-year group, of which structured means are set to zero. The first panel shows the means in 2003 and 2007 while the second panel lists the hypothetical means when the levels of other latent variables except for itself are equal to the average in 2004 (= zero).

difference in process satisfaction between 2003 and 2004 after control (from 0.026 to 0.071) is largely caused by the enhanced authoritarian tendency (as well as the increased evaluation of policy output) from 2003 to 2004. Yet the results of the average feeling of ineffectiveness do not essentially change even if we manipulate the level of output evaluation equal to the 2004 level, although the decreased differences from zero (from 0.052 to 0.034 in 2003 and from 0.155 to 0.095 in 2007, respectively) and the concomitantly increased *p*-values after control endorse the influence of the changes in output evaluation. (In this sense, there is room for further investigation on the unspecified sources of inefficacy, especially in 2007.) Finally, the resultant averages of institutional trust after control show again the clear dependence of this component on the satisfaction with policy output. When the levels of satisfaction with policy output and with political processes were equal to the average in 2004, the differences between different years decrease (from −0.241 to −0.213 in 2003 and from −0.340 to 0.013 in 2007, respectively), and particularly in 2007, the difference is no longer statistically significant at all.

5 Conclusion

In this paper we examined how citizens in Thailand perceived the changing political situations and what impacts, if any, the successive events including

the coup had on the political beliefs and attitudes of ordinary people. Analyses of the survey data conducted by AsiaBarometer project in 2003, 2004, and 2007 gave, at first glance, the impression that the military intervention delivered a greater shock. Significant perception changes, especially feelings about deterioration of the political system and its output performance, occurred between 2004 and 2007; people's sense of political effectiveness was considerably higher during the Thaksin administration, and subsequently declined with the fall of the regime. Trust in political institutions followed a similar trajectory, vindicating the positive aspects of Thaksin's populist politics. However, closer examination revealed that the eclipse of several aspects of democratic institutions, such as freedom of speech, had been perceived already during the Thaksin era, and high evaluation of the governance under the Thaksin administration was grossly inflated by satisfaction with populist policies. In actuality, the quality of governance by Thaksin was, already in his first term, as poor as that of today's military government in the eyes of ordinary people when their satisfaction with his populist policies was deducted. High trust in institutions was, too, almost entirely conditional on populist policies. We also found that commitment to a particular type of political system has been dispersing since 2004, while few people would disapprove of a democratic system, a considerable number of people showed an interest in applying non-democratic alternative systems to their country, despite the past bitter history. The last point is worth noting in closing this article, considering the similar events we witnessed in 1991–1992.

At that time the military leaders, who called themselves 'the National Peacekeeping Council', were also perceived as neutral, unselfish guardians of the state. The coup seemed to be widely accepted based on the small and sporadic number of protests against the coup (Englehart, 2003, p. 257). However, after the founding election in 1992 under the new constitution, General Suchinda Kraprayoon manifested his intention to assume premiership, presumably to perpetuate military rule.

Therefore, it is too early to assume that the coming election will smoothly lead the country to re-democratization. There is a lingering possibility that the military might again try to reestablish its reign over Thai politics. The September coup itself, which occurred in the context of low probability of military intervention since 1992, is indisputable evidence that this possibility is real. In that case, an uprising in the capital might be enough to counter a possible transgression by the provisional government as occurred in 1992, but as long as the level of commitment to a democratic system remains low, it would be difficult to deter the attempt itself, which would continue to prevent democratic consolidation in Thailand.

In any case, the findings of this paper are unusually solid as an analysis of the changing society in that they are founded on the empirical data collected

during the transition period. Only through social survey can we say something more than pure conjecture on the relationship between political attitudes and governance. Therefore, it is critically important to keep conducting social surveys in this volatile country whatever comes next.

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