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Book Reviews

Funston, John (ed.) (2009), *Divided Over Thaksin: Thailand's Coup and Problematic Transition*, Chiangmai: Silkworm Books, Singapore: ISEAS

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Thailand today is embroiled in deep political polarization. The fault-line runs through elected politicians, bureaucrats (including soldiers), and civil society. The conflict's focus is Thaksin Shinawatra, the populist Prime Minister (immensely popular with rural folk) who was overthrown in a 2006 coup which replaced the 1997 constitution with another. This *putsch* was supposed to be the end of Thaksin but he has shown remarkable resilience in first, helping to resurrect a pro-Thaksin political party which won at the polls of 2007, and second, when that party was dissolved by the judiciary, starting another and building up a "Red Shirts" protest movement to champion his cause. Lined up against the "Reds" are conservative/royalist "Yellow Shirt" demonstrators, who in 2008 helped to destabilize pro-Thaksin administrations. The pandemonium shows no signs of ending anytime soon.

This volume, edited by John Funston, offers a valuable tool to explicate various aspects of the volatility. As one of the first academic works on Thai political conflict *per se* in almost 30 years, it hauntingly harks back to the political divisions and violence of 1976 (see Morrell and Chai-anan 1981). The book derives from National Thai Studies Centre (NTSC) seminars/conferences at Australian National University in 2006 and 2007.

The volume seeks to comprehend how Thailand became mired in political turbulence beginning in late 2005 and why the 2006 coup as well as the 2007 constitution were unable to mend the societal split and, as Funston states, "return the country to democracy" (p. xv). One may wonder to what degree Funston considers Thailand a democracy before the coup since the country's level of democracy relative to other countries remains debatable. The volume is divided into 13 chapters and thematically separated into six chapters on coup and constitution, four on the southern insurgency, and three on economics and business. Over half of the chapters are written by Thais. Yet all offer discerning analyses on different dimensions of Thailand's crisis.

Looking first at the chapters analyzing coup and constitution, in chapter 1, Michael Montesano narrates the events up to the September 2006 coup. This began in 2005 when Thaksin cancelled the television program of media mogul (and Thaksin-friend-turned-enemy) Sondhi Limthongkul. On the "oddities" of Thaksin's opponents, Montesano discusses the Democrat

party, alleging that Democrat-led governments in the 1990s depended on only one man, then-Secretary-General Sanan Kachonprasert (p. 11). He then contends that certain factors placed the king's ties to politics in greater focus, including the 60-Year Jubilee and constant requests by "Yellow Shirt" demonstrators for monarchical intervention. Yet he conflates these two phenomena – accessible to all Thais alike – with the publication of two works in English by non-Thais which critically analyze Thailand's monarchy. One could argue that these were not accessible to most Thais. He then examines factors which contributed to the coup and suggests that Thais could have appointed a Prime Minister in March-May 2006 to avoid political damage inflicted by the September *putsch* (p. 21). Yet Montesano does not acknowledge that such an appointment would, like the coup, stall Thai democratization. He concludes by interestingly viewing 2006 as being defined by competing visions of the nature of democracy and the method of effecting political change (p. 22).

In Chapter 2, Thitinan Pongsudhirak examines the 1997 constitution amidst the coup-leaders' 2006 abrogation of that charter. He reviews its evolution from the May 1992 military massacre of civilians whereby a reform movement sought to enhance democracy, as well as reduce money politics and vote-buying. The eventual document modified the Lower House election system, created an elected Senate, enabled a strong executive, established agencies to monitor the government, and included measures to reduce corruption. Thitinan maintains that this constitution performed well until the Constitutional Court, in August 2001, ruled to acquit Thaksin in an assets concealment case, following pressure from Thaksin and others. Thereupon, he adds, the 1997 constitution quickly declined until Thaksin was able to dominate it. With that charter voided following the coup, Thitinan hopes that perhaps the spirit of its objectives will be followed. He adds that some of Thaksin's legacies (e.g. grassroots assistance) should persevere in any new constitution.

Gothom Arya, in Chapter 3, examines events since the establishment of the National Economic and Social Advisory Council (NESAC). Gothom, NESAC chairperson since 2005, states that NESAC was established in 1997 (along with other 'good governance' agencies) to offer advice on state development plans. Though the 2006 coup did not void NESAC (the 1997 charter was annulled) it performed services for the junta. Gothom next moves to examining civil society since the coup, stating that three societal groups possessed different views of it. Group A willingly accommodated it; Group B strongly opposed it; Group C supported the coup but wondered why the entire constitution had to be cancelled. He concludes by calling for dialogue, solidarity, and "participatory and deliberative democracy" (p. 44).

Gothom's chapter is informative but it would have been enlightening if he had elaborated on the Thaksin government's relationship with NESAC.

In Chapter 4, Chairat Charoensin-o-larn examines Thailand's post-2006 coup environment, stating that the takeover exacerbated a rift between impoverished Thais who adored Thaksin's populist measures and middle/upper class/royalist Thais who perceived the coup as essential to dislodge Thaksin from power. Chairat includes the military in this latter group but glosses over the fact that some soldiers supported Thaksin as well. He finds the coup counterproductive since it increased conflicts between the military/royalist "network" and Thaksin's own power "network". Also, he adds, the coup and subsequent military government paralleled growing economic malaise and restrictions on civil liberties. Chairat divides the 2006-2007 dictatorship period into two phases: September 19, 2006-May 2007 and May-December 2007. During the first phase the military appeared hesitant and uncertain, which, as Chairat argues, permitted politicians suspected of corruption time to hide their assets. The second phase saw three crucial actions take place against Thaksin: Thai Rak Thai was dissolved by court order; assets of his family were frozen amidst charges against Thaksin and his wife; and a new constitution was enacted which, according to Chairat, was written to weaken the executive as well as strengthen the judiciary and military. Chairat adroitly forecasts a greater political role for Thailand's military. He adds that order will only commence when Thai politics accommodates all key "social forces", thus generating "social trust" that will heal Thailand's divisions (pp. 73-74).

Meanwhile, Vitit Muntarbhorn, in Chapter 5, investigates Thailand's 18th constitution – the 2007 military-sponsored charter – seeing it as a reaction against Thaksin (p. 81). As such, he notes that it enshrines 1) increased limits on the executive branch; 2) more details on human rights; 3) more powers for independent agencies to protect citizens; 4) greater judicial powers; and 5) less required signatures for people to petition the state. Yet since the constitutional drafters were not elected by the people, he views Thai democracy today as merely "directed democracy" (p. 82). He adds that military authority has intensified since the coup and charter. Indeed, the Internal Security Act increases the Army Chief's power while protecting soldiers from judicial monitoring (p. 87). The Senate is half appointed, half-elected perhaps reflecting the distrust of common voters by the elite. As for civil society, Vitit states that the charter appears wary of it. He concludes that the greatest challenge for Thailand is to "revert to democracy" (p. 87). As with the introduction, one wonders to what extent the author views Thailand as a democracy. This chapter illustrates how the 2007 constitution

has institutionalized political changes but more elaboration would have been appreciated.

Like Chairat and Vitit, Suchit Bunbongkarn, in Chapter 6, casts a light on Thailand's 2007 constitution. He stresses that the charter broadens civil and political rights and was enacted following Thailand's first-ever popular referendum. Interestingly, Suchit argues that most Thais voting for the constitution did so simply because they wanted a return to parliamentary rule (p. 90). Regarding a future military role, Suchit disagrees with Chairat, contending that "the military is no longer a strong political force" (p. 92). Perhaps these views can be reconciled if one approaches Suchit's statement in terms of a long-term (30 years) analysis versus a more short-term (15 years) analysis for Chairat. Suchit views military influence in terms of the ability to launch a coup yet he does not mention other more indirect methods which soldiers use to sway civilian governments. For the future he implies that Thais must accept polarized politics (rural voters versus an urban middle class) as a natural outgrowth of democracy. He portends that political instability and weak governance will continue on, until Thailand's political system becomes institutionalized, though he does not explain how such institutionalization will occur. Suchit concludes that though Thailand is transitioning to fragile democracy, "another coup will not happen again" (p. 95).

The next four chapters concentrate on the insurgency in Thailand's south. In Chapter 7, Chaiwat Satha-anand metaphorically compares resolving southern violence to the Greek legend about untying the Gordian Knot (p. 97). The author, an ex-member of the National Reconciliation Commission, maintains that Thaksin ignored the report's recommendations while the successor Surayud government followed parts of it. He adds that the report's predictions of greater violence, civilian casualties, all facilitating regional economic downturn, "have come to pass" (p. 97). Chaiwat brilliantly discerns three factors which have hindered resolution of southern bloodshed. First, there is the "the insecurity industry", whereby people from all sides (e.g. certain bureaucrats, Muslim groups) have a vested interest in prolonging the insurgency to obtain personal benefits (p. 101-102). Second, clashing perceptions of the conflict based upon a map derived from a nation-state ideology versus a cultural map situating southern Thailand in the "Malay cultural world" (p. 102). Third, Thais must realize that Bangkok's "domestic colonization" fundamentally exacerbated the crisis (p. 104). He concludes that though only conciliation will resolve southern violence, it cannot be guaranteed that elected governments (perhaps receptive to a public seeking repression) will choose such measures, making a peaceful settlement challenging.

In Chapter 8, Michael Connors argues that southern Thai Malay/ Muslims represent a “stateless nation” which he defines as “a language and ethnic community”, though curiously not mentioning culture or religion as defining elements (p. 112). He continues that because this “nation” is located at the frontier of Thai identity, local Thai bureaucrats cannot reconcile the Thai “nation-state project” with facts on the ground in the South (p. 111). Connors emphasizes that history has contributed to violence in the region. The three provinces where the insurgency is active were once part of the Malay sultanate of Patani. After these were incorporated into Siam there emerged a paternalistic, colonial, administrative institution. These humiliating structures, repression, linguistic/ cultural differences, and anti-Malay bias worsened a burgeoning antagonism between local Malay-Muslims and Thais. Connors notes that the National Reconciliation Commission recommended establishing Malay as a *lingua franca* in the south, yet he faults Privy Council Chair Prem Tinsulanond (and other state officials) for not seeing the need for some degree of autonomous rule. As the state appears to have abandoned reconciliation for greater repression, such policies have further alienated southern Thai Malay-Muslims. Connors ultimately points to Thailand’s southern identity dilemma: how to imbed Malay-Muslims within a state-inculcated national identity comprising monarchy and religion (mostly Buddhism). He concludes that if Thailand is serious about peace, it must recognize the existence of the southern Malay-Muslim nation and culture.

In Chapter 9, John Funston examines decentralization as a possible exit strategy for the southern conflict. He states that amidst the south’s intensifying crisis and multiplicity of prescriptions, two decentralization proposals have appeared. The first, by academic Wan Kadir Che Man, sought greater southern autonomy based upon Chapter 9 (decentralized local government) of the 1997 constitution. The second proposal appeared in 2005 when the National Reconciliation Commission announced its recommendations to resolve the southern conflict. Among these was the establishment of a Southern Border Provinces Peace Strategy Administrative Centre (SBPPSAC) to oversee administrative and economic matters there. Yet SBPPSAC would be supported by a Council for the Development of the Southern Border Provinces Area, chosen from local religious leaders, scholars, and professional representatives, which would offer advice to the SBPPSAC, parliament and cabinet (pp. 130-131). Neither proposal was adopted by the state. Moreover, though decentralization has been enacted in Thailand, martial law continues in the three southernmost provinces. Funston concludes by advocating a form of regional administration though he admits many non-southern Thais would be opposed to it, fearing that this might lead to southern secession. One recent prescription which Funston

could have mentioned relates to the post-2007 electoral system establishing eight regions of 10 party list MPs each. Region 8 includes only far southern provinces, and thus potentially allows Muslims voters to dominate this region.

Chapter 10, by Joseph Chinyong Liow, next analyzes Islamic education in Thailand's south. He asserts that the state sees southern Islamic schools (*pondok*) as perhaps supportive of separatism while Malay-Muslims view them as crucial to their identity. Liow reviews the history of Siam's 1902 annexation of most of the Patani Kingdom and argues that Bangkok's attempts to control *pondok* only pushed religious teachers, heartened by Islamic reformism, against this incorporation. Some were imprisoned. He then calls attention to a widely-popular Wahhabi educator, Ismail Lufti Japakiya, who has preached against southern violence, instead seeking peace. Ismail Lufti's reformist Islamic schools, with financial support from Saudi Arabia, have brought more secularism and modernity to the *pondok* curriculum. Meanwhile, the reformist movement is sometimes met with hostility from traditionalists and suspicion from the state. Liow sees Islamic education as a "dynamic realm" where southern Thai Malay-Muslim identities "are contested and negotiated" (p. 148). He concludes that Thai policy-makers should pay attention to the impact of reformist ideology on southern Thailand. Though Liow's chapter is quite illuminating, more elaboration on the Thai state's relationship with Islamic schools would have been instructive.

The final three chapters turn to economics and business. In Chapter 11, Peter Warr examines Thailand's economy under Thaksin, given the ex-Prime Minister's promises, upon attaining office in 2001, to achieve double-digit growth and eradicate poverty within a decade. Warr first looks at Thai economic growth from 1951 to 2006, finding that it never reached 10 percent under Thaksin. He reveals that statistics on poverty incidence show no support for the idea that Thaksin was more successful at shrinking poverty than previous governments (p. 170). However, Warr acknowledges that Thaksin's government did indeed deliver actual benefits to the poor (e.g. 30 baht health scheme). Yet his administration did not perform better than Thailand's neighbours in terms of re-establishing private investment (in the aftermath of the 1997 financial crisis). Warr thus finds that, economically, Thaksin's government "was nothing special" (p. 171). This conclusion, though revisionist regarding Thaksin, is compelling given its statistical support. With regard to the southern conflict, Warr maintains that any long-term solution must address the socio-economic deprivations of southern Malay-Muslims.

Bhanupong Nidhiprabha, in Chapter 12, then considers Thailand's economy under the 2006-2007 dictatorship. He contends that the coup-

appointed Surayud Chulanond government was feeble and overly-tentative regarding policy implementation, and engaged in numerous policy failures (e.g. capital controls). Defense spending rose 24.3 percent while less priority was given to social welfare allocations (p. 186). He asserts that, as a result of these factors, the post-coup government tarnished economic stability, shaking the confidence of businesspeople. Bhanupong concludes that the coup and Surayud administration sapped the Thai economy at a time (2007) when Thailand could have grown simultaneous to the expansion of the world economy that year.

In the final chapter, Glen Robinson, a businessman in Thailand, observes business perceptions of Thailand's 2006-2007 period of political uncertainty. He notes that pessimistic media reports indicated that political turmoil and Surayud government policies had diminished tourism, FDI, and foreign business interest in Thailand. Yet data (pp. 195-197) told a different story: FDI was stable, Board of Investment applications increased, and tourism was soaring. He concludes that business interest in Thailand remains strong despite media perceptions and political instability though it could have been higher without the turmoil.

When taken together, this edited volume represents a valuable compendium about Thailand's intensifying political divisiveness, continuing southern violence, and the impact of political insecurity on the economy. It convincingly places Thaksin in the spotlight in terms of his rise to office, policy achievements, ability to build a powerful political constituency, forced exit from power, and continuing influence among Thais. Unfortunately, given the constant push-and-pull of Thai politics, books can quickly become outdated. Except for a brief summary in the introduction, this volume only looks at events until mid-late 2007. As this work was published in 2009, it would have been helpful if the authors could have updated some of their material to reflect the reality in 2009. Though the introduction is updated, it would have been constructive if the editor had touched upon military complicity in the cobbling together of the current Abhisit Vechachiwa government (see Wassana 2009). Furthermore, the book's title *Divided Over Thaksin*, begs the question of who supports or opposes Thaksin and why. The inclusion of chapters about the "Yellow" and/ or "Red Shirt" demonstrators would have been valuable. Finally, as the book examined the economy as well as the South, it would be beneficial to have a chapter on the southern regional economy. Despite any drawbacks, however, this work is well worth reading since it addresses its objective: exploring the origins of Thailand's expanding split with attention placed at the 2005-2007 period. In tackling this goal, the volume offers indispensable insights into Thailand's national and southern political crises, as well as the economic backdrop.

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