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Askew, Mark (ed.) (2010), *Legitimacy Crisis in Thailand*, Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books (= King Prajadhipok's Institute Yearbook No. 5 (2008/09))

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One of the single most serious problems that has pervaded the Thai political landscape since the fall of Thaksin's regime on 19 September 2006 by undemocratic means stems from the crisis of legitimacy. The fact that within less than five years since 2006, Thailand has experienced four different prime ministers does not necessarily reflect a sign of political impasse. Rather this could be seen as part of a normal political cycle in any democracy especially when the country adheres to parliamentarianism with a multiple party system where the coalition government could have a quick turnover. However, what makes Thailand unique is the way in which governments have fallen from power amidst polarized conflict across the nation, as well as unending insurgency in the deep south, all based upon different perceptions of nation and democracy. These problems involve one core issue: legitimacy.

This edited volume explores “the rightful uses, appropriate agents, and limits of political and state power; the uses and application of the law and its institutions; the status of parliamentary democracy and representation; the acceptable scope of popular political protest; the political role of the mass and alternative media as well as censorship and rights to expression” (3). As such, the book illustrates convincingly that the crisis of legitimacy in Thailand is indeed a multi-faceted phenomena. It demonstrates that “the right to rule” problem is historically embedded in Thailand, including different views of democracy between the poor majority and elites. In terms of theoretical contributions to the study of Thai politics, the book has fulfilled this task well. By pointing out the flaws of the ongoing debate, which has centred upon a simple dichotomy, the book takes into account both structural causes infused in Thailand's socio/politico-economic system as well as the agent – Thaksin – as responsible for the current crisis. Arguing against any one-sided position, Mark Askew in the introduction chapter interestingly sets structural inequalities (i.e., persistent trends of socioeconomic disparities between rural and urban) as contextual conditions critical for the emergence of a popular, strong leadership inherent in Thaksin. Thaksin has been an indispensable political agent given his ability to mobilize the majority of the populace, though Askew notes that the conflict would not have escalated to this level, had the intensifying trend of socioeconomic discrepancy in the country been absent.

Askew, in chapter 2, next provides the background account for Thailand's ongoing political calamity between 2008 and 2010 by focusing on

“power, legitimate rule, “democracy,” law, and the conditions of political consent” (31). Yet, in his focus upon “competing legitimacy claims” in crises that have occurred from 2008 until 2010, Askew tends to insufficiently downplay the role of state autonomy and capacity (45). It is quite clear that since the 2006 coup, the Thai state (especially in 2008) did not enjoy full autonomy and capacity. The fact that soldiers not only ousted the civilian-led government but actively supported the anti-Thaksin People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD), intervened in the 2008 formation of a governing coalition, backed the silent judicial coup which felled two governments, and bolstered censorship on press freedom revolving around *lese majeste* charges, completely failed to cope with problems in the deep southern provinces all point to a questioning of Thai state autonomy and state capacity.

Pavin Chachavalpongpun next examines how the discourse of nationalism has endlessly become an effective political tool among elites in the case of border issues over the Preah Vihear Temple between Thailand and Cambodia. Pavin illustrates that nationalism intertwined with royalist sentiment as initiated by the PAD has been politically exploited as to influence domestic politics and Thailand’s foreign relations with its neighbour. Relying on powerfully symbiotic ideologies (nationalism and royalism), an alliance among conveniently concerted anti-Thaksin groups grasped the opportunity of controversy over the Preah Vihear Temple in weakening the legitimacy of Thaksin’s proxy Samak government in 2008 when the latter endorsed “the Cambodian request to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to have [Preah Vihear] listed as a “World Heritage” site” (83). Interestingly, Pavin shows that while the exploitation of nationalism could endanger the political situation domestically and internationally, the nationalist card has been shrewdly played in Thailand’s readily receptive environment which could be the result of the combination of the country’s artificially reconstructed history regarding “lost territories” as well as the state’s tendency of xenophobia on the simple basis of “us” vs. “them”. Indeed, the opposition against Thaksin used nationalist discourses and simply equated their enemies (others) to devils. Pavin might ought to consider to what extent nationalism would have remained a powerful force under different circumstances. One wonders whether the PAD’s use of nationalism would be as effective without the strong support of the military or judiciary.

Meanwhile, Michael Nelson examines how the PAD evolved since 2005 as a movement against Thaksin’s government and came to also have a political party after its decision to break from its previous alliance with the Democrat Party on key issues. Nelson argues that the PAD movement can be regarded a “stream of contention” that contains “moments of collective

claim making,” which ultimately had an influence on Thailand’s political system and the country’s path of democratization (120). In this “collective claim making” process, the PAD fiercely attacked “money politics”, which was long perceived as a disease of Thai civilian-led governments. The PAD instead has called for the *nouveau* idea of “new politics”, encompassing corporatist representation (combination of elected and appointed representatives) and the people’s assembly. Nelson notes that the PAD eventually hijacked the Government House and the National Assembly so as to create a “moment of collective claim making” (128). Ironically, as Nelson shows, the ad hoc nature of “new politics” has become a great challenge for the PAD when it finally decides how to implement it. The dilemmas facing the PAD involve implementation of the “new politics” idea via the establishment of political party (New Politics Party (NPP)) and maintaining its legitimacy and credibility via the original nature of the PAD movement. Yet, if the PAD chooses to emphasize the movement over its NPP as a spearhead of the “new politics” in the stream of contention, it might have to cope with another difficulty – the survival of the organization given the series of legal lawsuits against the PAD’s leaders. Finally, Nelson concludes that if the PAD continues to use street politics to achieve its goals, we might continue to see more “moments of collective claim making” by the PAD (153). Yet, Nelson fails to take into account the Red Shirts’ contention which seeks to keep the military out of politics. Thus, there are two rather than one competing “moments of collective claim-making” in Thailand’s political landscape.

Pravit Rojanaphruk and Jiranan Hanthamrongwit next explore the role of the Thai media since the 2006 coup. They contend that over the past three years since the 2006 coup, the mainstream media in Thailand faces the crisis of legitimacy given that it has been increasingly politicized, and rendered to be merely a political tool to serve the interests of “the middle class or old elites” at the expense of those of the lower class (164). Pravit and Jiranan depict the dual roles of media: mirror and lamp especially among the mainstream as being part of a deepening of political crisis. As the authors illustrate, in presenting a “biased and superficial” depiction of the reds or lower class, and a reluctance to examine or analyse issues related to the perceived political role of the monarchy, the mainstream media has tended to become only a “distorted mirror.” Thus, the marginalized must look for alternative channels (internet, leaflets) beyond the print media for their access to political reality. This in turn would reduce the political space for any diverse political worldviews.

Meanwhile, the role of the Thai mainstream media as a guiding lamp has yet to be fulfilled. Pravit and Jiranan portray those mainstreams more or

less as a “misrepresented lamp,” which could be manifested by their quiescent viewpoint of the coup, receptive role of media censorship, preoccupation with the less critical issue such as “peace journalism”, and apparent lack of interest in publicly questioning the discernable “political role of the palace.” Pravit and Jiranan note that all of those failed tasks among the mainstream media might reflect their deliberate attempt to gain a quick fix on Thailand’s political turbulence. Finally, Pravit and Jiranan attribute the biased political worldview among the mainstream media to its previous sour relations with the Thaksin administration with his punitive measures on any criticism on Thaksin, the middle class- or Bangkok-based backgrounds of the mainstream journalists with their “patronizing attitudes” on the lower strata of the Thai populace, and the strict control over *lese majeste* law. Actually, one could argue that Thailand’s polarization has made it difficult for alternative views to be expressed. Any information that the media presents might inevitably sensitize those (either the yellows or reds) who belong to the comfort zone of their own version of “imagined community.” Yet, at the critical juncture where the mainstream media could have played an essential role as a good mirror in presenting an “impartial” view of reality, had they turned themselves into a spearhead in expanding more space for any diverse views beyond those of vigilantes, they might have maintained and enjoyed their legitimacy, which is a necessary quality for being a “good lamp.” Under this context, a good mirror and a good lamp would become the same side of the coin.

Paul Chambers explores the role of the military in politics since the 2006 military coup by the assessment of civilian control over key political spheres between 2007 and 2009. The study demonstrates that expanding military power in Thailand has eroded the legitimacy of civilian rule, following the coup itself and then the coup-enacted 2007 constitution. The growth of armed forces influence can be evidenced by the decline in control of “decision-making power” by civilian leaders over key areas: “elite recruitment”, “military organization”, and “internal security”. Chambers shows that the Thai military has exerted influence over decision-making processes in major civilian areas at both formal and informal levels. With regard to “elite recruitment,” while the control by the military over appointed political positions such as in the Cabinet and the Senate was inscribed in law, the influence of the armed forces in parliamentary politics following the downfall of both the pro-Thaksin Samak and Somchai governments in 2008 was achieved informally (e.g. cobbling together of the anti-Thaksin Abhisit government).

Likewise, Chambers illustrates the increasing role of the armed forces (e.g. its final say on senior appointments) in the area of military organization

including the budget and appointment of senior officers. Chambers adds that since the coup 2006, the overhaul of Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC), institutionalized via the Internal Security Act, has led ISOC to become a controlling mechanism of the armed forces not only externally but also internally through “intervention in the judicial process” as well as infringement upon civilian liberties with legal impunity (205). This actually could make someone argue that Thailand is becoming a military state. Finally, Chambers stresses that the post-2007 military has prioritized a “back seat” strategy over an overt political role given possible negative public reactions. Yet, his preference for a back seat strategy contradicts what is happening now. As we have seen recently, the establishment of the Matuphum political party led by the former coup leader ret. Gen. Sonthi, the high number of retired military in the Senate, the proposal for a new homeland security bureau, the increasing role of the armed force in elite recruitment, all contradict the direction of a “back seat” strategy. Ultimately, Chambers fails to provide an elaborate answer as to why the military has recently been active in politics, and what forces have supported its increasing role.

Mark Askew meanwhile provides a richly-detailed account about the poor performance of the Thai government especially under Abhisit administration (2008-2010) in tackling problems in the southern borderland provinces after the 2006 coup. It is argued that the persistent insurgency-led violence in the far southern provinces in tandem with the post-coup ideological deep-seated division at the national level have become the “twin crises of legitimacy and order” or the crises of “center” and “periphery” for the Thai state (237).

Askew traces the state’s failed policy to its erroneous assumptions of “entrenched-ceremonial symbolic culture” as well as ambiguously defined causes of the southern problem. With the preoccupation of rhetoric and symbolism on “peace building,” “reconciliation,” and “national harmony,” the Thai state conveniently portrays the southern insurgency as “misguided” along with its erroneous perception that “the problem was development-related” (251). Though military operations were combined with “sustainable development” and “community strengthening”, the state policy nonetheless failed to eradicate the southern problem. Askew seems to imply that the problems in the deep south have only recently become of national significance. Actually, the southern problem had already gained “national attention” over the last two decades. Moreover, the talk about possible autonomous governance as a solution to the deep southern crisis is not anything new. This idea was discussed even before the 2006 coup. Lastly, Askew does not elaborate about how the crisis in the South may be causally related to the 2009 Red Shirt protests, if at all.

Turning to the chapter entitled “Four Thai Pathologies, Late 2009”, Michael Montesano examines the causes of Thailand’s political turbulence up to 2009. He metaphorically regards the country’s calamity as indicative of “disease” which stems from four pathologies: the post-1997 Thai economy which has widened the social disparity of the country, the murderous hatred of Thaksin as a nation polarizer, the unending unrest in the deep south, and concern over the succession of the current reign. Interestingly, Montesano sees the war in the Deep South as producing a possible snowball effect for other areas of the country. In order to cure this peril, Montesano suggests the revival of the system of “administrative circles” or “Monthon” as a way to decolonizing Bangkok’s influence across the nation. Yet, in actuality, this solution might not be palatable in the eyes of Bangkokians, especially the elites. As Montesano argues, the impact of the structure of the post-1997 economy has already created “non-material” aspirations with deep attachment of social status. This in turn might make the elites in Bangkok uneasy with such ideas, thus making the decolonization of Bangkok via the Monthon system unrealistic. Finally, Montesano offers a comparative perspective of South Korea as to how to move beyond the military regime during the path of democratization. Yet, one might wonder whether the experiences in South Korea would be applicable to Thailand given the latter’s poor performance in dealing with “transitional justice” in which the wrongdoings should be brought to justice. In Thailand, several examples in the course of political history have shown otherwise. No military leaders who were responsible for killing civilians have ever been brought into justice. Besides, there are several roadblocks lie ahead. These include institutional obstacles such as the Internal Security Act where soldiers can act with legal impunity, the *lese majeste* law, a politicized judiciary as well as the Thai cultural impediment of forgiving and forgetting (*leum ngai*) which has operated under the rubric of peace, order, and unity. Until these issues are resolved, Thailand will continue to live in an “imagined community” under the auspices of the holy trinity.

In the final analysis, the book seems to suggest that Thailand’s political problems have long revolved around the holy trinity of Nation, Religion (Buddhism), Monarchy which have oftentimes been manipulated one way or another to benefit the interests of the state operating under the guidance of Thai elites (palace, military, bureaucracy, politicians). During the communist insurgency in the late 1960s and 1970s, these three pillars were ideologically exploited by the Thai military to justify the killings of anti-military activist students. Yet, it is undeniable that the notion of the holy trinity since the 2006 coup has been widely used on a more extensive scale with a higher number of state and non-state actors (i.e., the movement of street politics).

Ultimately, as this edited volume has shown, the crisis of legitimacy currently challenging the Thai state is expanding in scope across different dimensions. Indeed, the authors altogether point to several crises that seem to be tearing Thailand apart. These might dynamically interact with each other in a complex manner both at the regional and national level. It is this quality of emphasizing problems in legitimacy which makes this book particularly worth reading. However, one must keep in mind that resolving the country's legitimacy crises depends on the willingness of Thai elites, including senior military generals, royal cliques, high-ranking bureaucrats, and traditional capitalists to accept current political realities. These groups, for example, must accept the recent July 2011 landslide electoral victory of the pro-Thaksin Puea Thai Party. If they refuse to acknowledge the electoral outcome, Thailand might end up in a dire situation leading to potential civil war. In other words, if aristocrats seek to overturn the electoral outcome (e.g. judicial or military coup), a people's revolution could erupt which might lead to large-scale violent conflict – the ultimate crisis of legitimacy.

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