Party System and Democratisation Process in Thailand

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Abstract: The Kingdom of Thailand is considered a country where many favourable factors converge to form a sustainable democratic system. Yet, reality has shown that the democratisation process has encountered many challenges. Why is democratic consolidation difficult for Thailand? In order to find the answer to such a question, this article aims to explore the nature of Thai democracy, the democratisation process, and particularly the party system as variables of democratic consolidation in Thailand. Research findings show that people's participation in electoral politics can be hindered by the elite, especially the monarchy and the military. In such a context, the Thai party system continues to develop to meet the essence of Thai democracy. It can be seen that with a low level of institutionalisation, the Thai party system has not taken on the role of an essential institution for the country's democratisation process.

1. Introduction

In the modern history of Southeast Asia, Thailand is a unique case among countries in the region, in that it is the only one never to have been colonised. In terms of modernisation and development, Thailand is blessed with many favourable conditions for the consolidation of a democratic regime. The absolute monarchy in Thailand wielding supreme royal power ended in 1932. Under the constitution promulgated in 1946, the Democrat Party was established (Aurel, C. & Philip, L., 2018) as a fully functioning political party. Through the process of democratisation, whether continuous or discontinuous, Thai political parties continued to develop, especially since 1979, the parties have become increasingly institutionalised due to the continuous development of the Thai parliamentary system (Wolfgang, S. & Ulrike, E. F., 1998). In addition, unlike many cases where democratic development has stalled, Thailand

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enjoys a thriving market economy and it was one of the world's fastest-growing economies during the 1960s to 1990s period. Except for the South which witnesses ethnic-religious violence, on a social level Thailand is generally free from ethnic conflicts and the country has experienced decades of relatively strong social stability (Daniel, H. U. & Chandra, M., 2016).

In theory, all the above-mentioned political, economic, and social factors help Thailand escape the burdens that many other countries struggle with in the process of democratic development and these help strengthen democracy in Thailand. However, since the 1932 democratic milestone, Thailand's democratisation process has not been a smooth one due to 19 military coups up to 2014 (Nguyen Hong Quang, 2018, p.188), 20 constitutional changes, and political mobilisation which turned violent. To date, Thailand cannot be seen as a strongly consolidated democracy. The above facts raise several questions: why is it so difficult for democratic consolidation in Thailand under conditions that are theoretically considered favourable for democracy? Why has a democratic regime proved so difficult to maintain and challenging for Thais to manage? What factors hinder the development of sustainable democracy in Thailand, and what role do political institutions play in Thailand's democratisation process?

In order to find the answers to the above questions, this article aims to shed light on the essence of current Thai democracy as well as the important milestones in the democratisation process. Also, by evaluating the party system - together with the middle class and civil society which are important factors affecting the democratic process - the article explains the relationship between the Thai party system and the democratisation process, as well as the role of the political parties and the party system play in this process.

Ever since 1932, when Thailand was transformed into a democratic regime, the country's democratisation process has not gone as smoothly as expected. Rather, it has been marked by many turning points in its history. The Thai people's fight for democracy has recorded significant achievements with the adoption of the 1997 Constitution. This was lauded as the "People's Constitution", a "landmark in Thai democratic constitutional reform" (Wikipedia). This constitution paved the way for Thai people to participate in their country's political system. However, it is ironic that with the first parliamentary elections after the constitution was introduced leading to the formation of the government under Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, Thai politics has never reflected the consolidation of the country's democracy. Since the 2000s, the nation has experienced instability due to various violent demonstrations and military coups. Consequently, this period, especially since the 2006 military coup that ousted Thaksin, cannot be seen as one of democratisation or the consolidation of democracy. This reality shows that the historical achievements in Thailand's democratisation process were mainly recorded in the period from 1932 to 2000. Therefore, the examination of the country's democratisation process is closely linked to developments and events that occurred during this time.

2. Party system in Thailand

2.1. Concepts of party system

The party system is similar to any other system composed of relevant interacting units. Conventional wisdom has it that a party system is an entity different to, and not merely a collection of, political parties. Rather, a party system is composed of political parties operating in a country, within an organisational structure characterised by some properties of the party system. Duverger was among the first scholars to use the concept "party systems". Classification of party systems is based purely on the number of political parties (Maurice, D., 1954, p.206), and the criteria he used related mainly to the properties of political parties, rather than the relationships between political parties. Other scholars such as Eckstein H. (1968), Satori G. (1976), and Mair P. (1997) placed emphasis on the relationship between or interactions among political parties when defining party systems whereby the latter is not merely the sum of the components making up party systems. Meanwhile, Mainwaring and Tocal argued that a political party system is a set of political parties operating within a given mode of interaction in order to form a system (Scott, M. & Mariano, T., 2005, p.319). The idea of 'system' also implies the continuous operation of components of such a system and with a minimum level of stability within the modes of interaction (cooperation or competition) among political parties.

The stability in the modes of interaction among political parties is related to the concept of institutionalisation of party systems which is seen as an important driver of and closely linked to, the democratisation process and efforts to consolidate democracy. In particular, the relationship (if it exists), as well as the role played by the institutionalisation of party systems in the democratisation process has also gained scholars' attention when examining the third wave of democratisation (since 1974 according to Huntington's classification) which led to the increased number of global democracies. As Huntington (1968) argued: "institutionalisation is a process in which organisations and procedures achieve values and stability" (Fernanndo, C. B., 2016). An institutionalised party system is a system in which actors develop expectations and behaviours based on the premise that the basic features and rules of competition among, and within, political parties themselves would prevail in the near future. Within an institutionalised party system, there has always been stability in the form of actions and identities of political parties. The majority of scholars agree that the institutionalisation of party systems and political parties have been important factors helping to consolidate democracy and create favourable conditions for democracy to function effectively in society. In other words, institutionalisation of the party system is the necessary condition for the consolidation of a democracy.

2.2. Party system in Thailand

Thai political parties are a part of Thailand's party system. They have a relatively short history compared to those in the West. The first party to be established in Thailand was the People's Party (Prachachon) in 1927, which bore some common features of a modern political party (Aurel, C. & Philip, L., 2018). However, political parties only became a common feature in Thai politics when the 1946 Constitution allowed their free formation.

Under the 1946 Constitution, a number of parties emerged; however, only the Democrat Party (Prachatipat) remains to this day. "The Democrat Party was the great survivor in the Thailand's intense history of parliamentary politics" (Askew, M., 2008). Since the establishment of the first political party in 1946, Thailand's political parties have gradually developed throughout the periodically interrupted democratisation process. Due to effective control of the state apparatus, military coups, forced dissolution of political parties, and legislative decrees issued by the "bureaucracy", the emergence of any politically and organisationally strong parties was hindered until the first half of the 1970s (Aurel, C. & Philip, L., 2018, p.311).

As mentioned in the Introduction, since 1979, Thailand's political parties have been institutionalised thanks to the smooth development of the parliamentary system. While their operation was stalled due to the 1991 military coup, political parties were not banned. Against this backdrop, the Thai party system began to take root. In the 1990s, the existence of the party system was characterised by both the expansion and contraction of political parties. As a product of Thai society, the party system was shaped and influenced by social relations and dominating forces. In general, ideology does not play a decisive role in the formation of political parties in Thailand. In fact, influence comes from the following political and institutional factors: (1) vertical centralisation of political power and access to state resources in a unitary organised state; (2) the horisontal decentralisation of decision-making authority between state agencies and cabinet ministries; and (3) the dispersion of political authority within the cabinet and factionalised political parties (Erik, M. K., 2015, pp.280-304). In addition, the block voting system and the politics of money, prevalent in Thailand, have also accelerated the impact of these three factors on this country's party system.

In Thai society, three economic-political and socio-cultural factors exert a great impact on the development of the country's political system and political parties alike, namely: the bureaucracy, uneven development, and patron-client relationship. However, even though the Thai party system is affected by these three factors it does not necessarily mean it is the "victim". This system also plays an important role in guiding political development, albeit it is a limited one, and it is influenced by other social forces and elements (Wolfgang, S. & Ulrike E. F., 1998). There are five related features of the political parties and the party system of Thailand.

Firstly, the Thai party system is highly fragmented (based on the effective number of parties in parliament).

Secondly, the party system is regionalised (Erik, M. K., 2015, pp.280-304). Most political parties only attract voters from certain localities. Even Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai Party (Thai Love Thai) (TRT), which won a majority with three-quarters of parliamentary seats in the 2005 elections, failed to win a seat in the South which was a Democrat Party stronghold. In a regionalised party system such as that in Thailand, public policies are more geared towards satisfying specific local interests, often to the detriment of the national common good. Furthermore, as parties concentrate on certain groups of provinces, political polarisation between constituencies tends to deepen.

Thirdly, an important feature of Thai political parties relates to the weak level of institutionalisation, coupled with the fact that for many years the Thai political party system has been very unstable. Thai political parties are characterised by "domination of personality and influenced by money and personalism, patronism, and kinship which prevail among party members" (Mc. Cargo, 1997, p.118). In fact, the parties in Thailand are only institutionalised to the extent that they are given legitimacy by the elite in open elections and the parties are the key route to achieving power, but most parties do not have any organisational identity (Aurel, C. & Philip, V., 2012).

Fourthly, party factions are essential actors in Thai partisan politics (James, O., 1994). They are often temporary groups of politicians and their supporters both inside and outside the party. Factions unite in order to obtain shared interests, either material or political. The power relations within a faction centre on a key figure or a financier who seizes his/her power through a dependent relationship with factional-based politicians. Factions within a party are classified according to key figures and regions and are generally politicians at the provincial level and members of the parliament.

Thailand's 1997 Constitution succeeded in limiting these factions by increasing party decentralisation. However, the 2007 Constitution "emancipated" factions from the 1997 constitutional restrictions. As a result, factions remain important actors in the making and breaking of parties and cabinets.

Fifthly, Thai political parties generally follow two models: the leader-dominated party and the cadre party (Aurel, C. & Philip, L., 2018). The leader-dominated party has a loose organisational structure and is governed by the most prominent figure. Generally speaking, the party leader (always the party founder) is self-elected. Under this model, effects of the organisational structure are kept to a minimum and the loosening of institutionalisation will be exploited to mobilise political support. Meanwhile, the right to make decisions is in the hands of the central figure. Therefore, in this model, decision-making is dictatorial and highly concentrated.

In contrast, the cadre party model is not centred on the most prominent political figure or the one with the resources. It is a model governed by a small group of leaders who are freely chosen. They can be elected leaders, well-known community leaders and high-ranking party members. This party model is characterised by a loose institutionalised structure with a dictatorial but decentralised decision-making mechanism (Paul, C. & Aurel, C., 2008).

Mass-bureaucratic political parties with large memberships and elaborate party platforms do not exist in Thailand where it is difficult for a strong party with an ideological appeal to join a coalition. Therefore, the ideological appeal proves to be a political weakness, rather than a strength in allowing a party to join the ruling coalition. As a result, most parties are neither aligned with an agenda nor interested in policy-seeking and outcomes (Siripan, N. S., 2006).

This is combined with a lack of ideological appeal and party platforms that would normally link political parties with social groups and provide a voice to the rank and file. Thus, from this perspective, the parties are held back from developing better links with society. The rise of the TRT Party in the late 1990s was an important event in Thai politics and it also represented emergence of a new type of political party. The TRT's leader, Thaksin Sinawatra, consolidated power and established a vertically-centralised leadership structure. Additionally, the TRT was the first party to convey the political message to low-class voters, whose discontent increased due to the 1997 financial crisis.

The instability in Thailand's party system has been evidenced by very low institutionalisation, with the formation of parties that win seats in elections but then "disappear" very quickly (to name a few: the Social Action Party, the Thai Citizen Party, and recently the dissolution of the Future Forward Party after it ranked third in the 2019 general elections). The following are some of the main parties in the Thai party system in recent years.

- The Thai Rak Thai Party (TRT) was established in 1998 by Thaksin Shinawatra, a billionaire in the telecommunications sector. The party won the 2001 general election and the TRT government pursued populist policies, gaining political support from voters in rural areas. The party went on to win the 2005 elections that kept Thaksin in power to 2006. He was then ousted by the military coup on 19 September 2006 and the TRT was dissolved on 30 May 2007.

- The People's Power Party (PPP) (Phalang Prachachon) was established in 1998 and recruited many TRT members after their party was dissolved. In the December 2007 elections, Thaksin-backed politicians rose to power again after winning the majority of the vote. A coalition government was formed which included four parties that had broken away from the TRT and the Chart Thai Party (mentioned below) with PPP's leader, Samak Sundaravej, becoming Prime Minister. The PPP was then dissolved by the Thai Election Commission in September 2008.

- The Democrat Party (Prachatipat) was established on 5 April 1946 as a royalist party. The 1976 military coup against the Democrat Party government had consolidated the party's focus towards supporting democracy. The party leader Chuan Likphai twice served as Prime Minister (1992-1995 and 1997-2001) followed by Abhisit Vejjajiva in the period of 2008-2011. The Democrat Party has proved to be the leading party in Thai democracy and compared to other parties it has been institutionalised.

- The Thai Nation Party (Chart Thai), established in 1974, is the second oldest party in Thailand. It won the 1988 general elections, and Chatchai became Prime Minister and remained in power until 1991 after a military coup. In 1992, Banharn Silpa-archa took over as party leader, and he became Prime Minister after winning the 1995 elections. Since 1997, the Chart Thai Party has been medium-sized in Thailand, representing constituencies in the Central region.

- The People's State Power Party (Palang Pracharath), established in 2018, has a close relationship with the National Council for Peace and Order - the ruling military junta following the 2014 military coup. The incumbent Prime Minister, Prayut Chan-o-cha, is the party leader. The National Council for Peace and Order officially supported Prayut in the 2019 elections.

- The For Thais Party (Pheu Thai), established in 2008, is the third incarnation of the TRT. For the first time since its establishment, the For Thais Party participated in, and won, the 2011 general elections - its female candidate Yingluck Shinawatra became Prime Minister. However, the Yingluck government was then overthrown by the military coup on 22 May 2014. The For Thais Party remains a strong party in Thai politics and in the 2019 general elections it won 7 million votes, becoming runner-up to the People's State Power Party.

In the 2001 to 2005 period, the Thailand party system went through a transition process, and there was a sharp drop in the number of political parties. This was evidenced by the fact that from 1979 to 2001, there were often as many as 16 active parties in Thailand competing in elections, with the effective number of parliamentary political parties hovering around 6.0. After the enactment of the 1997 Constitution (which buttressed party power) as well as the prominent rise of the TRT, the effective number of parties dropped from 4.6 (1996) to 1.6 in the 2005 election.

After the 2006 military coup, the Thai party system was once again fractionalised (highly fragmented) as shown by the effective number of parties which rose again to 2.79 in 2007, following the passing of the 2007 Constitution (Paul, W. C. & Aurel, C., 2010). The fragmentation of the Thai political party system in the 2007 general elections was demonstrated by the fact that five out of the seven parties which won seats were factions formed after the 2006 military coup that ousted Thaksin.

Almost all of these parties originated from Thaksin's TRT party. In the meantime, the Democrat Party and the Thai Nation Party were smaller but existed throughout several

decades. The People's Power Party was the largest of the TRT's incarnations, winning a significant number of votes in the 2007 elections and joining the coalition with four other small parties.

In December 2008, the Constitutional Court of Thailand issued a ruling to dissolve the People's Power Party. As a result, the majority of its members of parliament joined the For Thais Party (which had been newly established). The fragmentation in the Thai party system continued to be reflected in the 2011 general elections which saw 40 parties competing but mainly small ones which were incapable of winning seats at a national level (Aurel, C. & Philip, L., 2018, p.314). The 2019 general elections were the most recent elections held in which a total of 77 parties competed, including the two largest parties - the For Thais Party and the Democrat Party. The For Thais Party supported former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra had won the majority of seats before the 2014 military coup while the Democrat Party was the main opposition party before the coup. These two parties, together with the inclusion of some new entities such as the People's Power Party and the Future Forward Party (Phak Anakhot Mai established in 2008, dissolved in 2020) joined ranks with the For Thais Party and the Democrat Party and ran the election campaign by either supporting or opposing the Prayut-Chan-ocha government. The election resulted in 27 political parties sharing representation in the new House of Representatives. This was the biggest number so far and it hailed a new record given the fact that over the past eight decades only about ten parties have been represented in the House. The House of Representatives was established in 2011, 2007, 2001, and 1996 with representation from 11, nine, seven and nine parties, respectively (Tuoi Tre Online). These statistics show the high fragmentation of Thai politics. Most parties are more interested in achieving material benefits for their leaders and seeking office instead of policy-making.

3. Democratisation process in Thailand

3.1. Thai political parties and philosophy of democracy

This article aims to analyse the relationship between the party system and the democratisation process; therefore, it examines democracy through the eyes of political institutions. From this perspective, the government must be the government by the people, and so democracy is the institutionalisation of the power of the people. People's power is institutionalised through civil liberties, thereby allowing the people to manage their lives and decide their fate.

Although democracy is important to all political parties in a democratic society, they do not necessarily share the same philosophy of democracy. As a result, or due to being a product of the democratisation process, every political party in Thailand has a mechanism

to pursue its own goals in elections. To state differently, a majority of Thai political parties have emerged from the struggle between democracy and anti-democracy. Although shortcomings do still exist, Thailand is still seen as a democracy, albeit a fragile one. Thai political parties, though different from one another in terms of political motives, all advocate democracy in principle. In operating in a democratic environment, they must commit to the regulations that govern political parties and elections and abide by the democratic values accepted in Thai society and politics. Even when the People's State Power Party (Palang Pracharath), which aligned itself with the incumbent Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha, was backed by the king and the military during the period of democratic reversal, it had to join the electoral political process and could not publicly reject Thai political democratic values. Most parties have pro-democracy platforms with the king as the head of state. No Thai political party dares to try to turn Thailand into a republic because this would go against the constitution and would not be accepted by voters. Under the strong influence of the government, the state apparatus and the mobilised masses, an ideology that would harm the nation, religion, and royalty cannot survive long. Besides the common feature that parties' ideologies are constrained in order to match the ideology of the state, Thai political parties have some differences in commitment, opinion and their fight for democracy. The Democrat Party, the oldest political party still in existence today, has always affirmed that it cherishes and highly values democracy and opposes all forms of dictatorship. In fact, the Democrat Party was opposed to the military government in the past. During the 1991 military coup and the suppression of the 1992 protests in Bangkok, only three parties - the Palang Dharma Party, the New Aspiration Party, and the Democrat Party - opposed the military government's brutal actions and they provided both material and moral support for the protests. Several other parties, such as the Thai Nation Party (Chart Thai), the Thai Citizen Party (Prachakorn Thai), and the Social Action Party (dissolved in 2018) accepted the coup, joined the coalition government and strongly supported the repression. Following the coup, the political parties temporarily split into two factions. One faction stood with the people and supported democracy; the other cooperated with the military junta.

A common characteristic of Thai political parties and politicians, in particular, is that democracy must be viewed in an "elite way", thereby importance is attached to the role of "the political elite" in a democracy and in national governance. As Joseph Schumpeter argued (1942) democracy is neither a government by the people nor a tool to realise the will of the people. Rather, the role of the people is merely to elect their governors from those in competing political elites (Joseph, S., 1942). Policymaking is the exclusive role of parties and politicians because they are elected by the voters to carry out this function. The general public is not allowed to have a voice in such complex matters. Allowing citizens to actively participate in public affairs could be risky, leading to crowd domination. The role of the masses in democracy ends after their votes have been cast. Therefore, in reality,

participatory democracy is rather unfamiliar to most Thai political parties, even though in their manifestos they have always upheld their support for the participation of the people and the community in policymaking related to important issues.

Thai political parties are not organised based on ideology; the ways parties perceive their role and mission in Thai society have changed over time and they tend not to differ from one another. This is reflected in the parties' general election platforms. The difference between the Thai political parties is in style and appearance, but not in substance (David, M., 1996, pp.361-375). To attract voters and to gain legitimacy, parties define their role in each election to match voters' perceptions of public matters or the demands of the masses at that time. For example, all parties placed political reform high on their agendas when this became a hot topic. In order to pursue their goals, the parties often have their own approach and some may have better-organised programmes compared to others. Small parties in Thailand do not have well-organised programmes due to having less influence in the coalition government, thus they are unable to implement campaign programmes (Wolfgang, S. & Ulrike, E. F., 1998, p.403). Parties' action plans are often formulated by scholars and/or experts appointed as party advisors before each election and do not reflect any substantive ideology, orientation, or the intentions of the party and its leaders. These programmes are designed to legitimise the party's role in the eyes of voters particularly in major cities such as Bangkok. Although middle-class voters are very interested in the parties' agendas, for political parties to secure a majority of seats in parliament they depend on the rural voters, who decide whether or not to vote based on their immediate needs. In general, political parties must satisfy both the middle class in the big cities and people in the rural areas. However, the process of democratisation and the increase in power of civil society has forced the parties to formulate more elaborate programmes, in line with the vision laid out in their manifestos.

3.2. Stages of democratisation process in Thailand

When talking about the democratisation process, it is essential to identify the milestones, i.e. when the democratisation process has made progress. In general, the democratisation process can be divided into democratic transition and consolidation phases. To shed light on the democratisation process in Thailand, it is necessary to define what democratisation means in this country. In other words, it is necessary to elucidate the criteria for the democratisation process in Thailand.

This began in Thailand in 1973 when the people rose up against their military rulers. Student-led demonstrations peaked on 14 October 1973 with the overthrowing of the military government under the leadership of Prime Minister Thanom Kittikachorn. This event was a turning point in the democratisation process and the students were hailed as the "14 October Generation". However, it was the "conservative" treaty negotiated and

institutionalised by the Prem Tinsulanonda administration in the 1980s, bringing about the exclusion of the left-wing and the emergence of parliamentary democracy, that determined the transition toward democratisation.

Thailand maintains a parliamentary system of government under a constitutional monarchy. The most senior policymakers include the prime minister and cabinet ministers. Therefore, Thai politics is considered democratic when fair and competitive elections are held; the government in power is determined by the election results, and the prime minister and government ministers are appointed from elected members of parliament. From the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932 to the 1990s, on only four occasions, in 1946, 1975, 1976 and 1988 (Tamada, Y., 2008, p.14), Thai governments were established based on election results. The percentage of parliamentarians represented in the cabinet was zero (0%) in the 1932 to1944 period, increasing to an average of 35% in the 1944 to 1957 phase, before it dropped again to 0% for over 16 years from October 1958. During the 1970s and after the collapse of the military government, the percentage peaked at over 96% but then it declined falling to 0% again in 1976 following the military coup. After the 1979 general elections, the percentage of parliamentarians in the cabinet was 19%, gradually increasing to 40% and then over 80% under the Prem Government from 1980 to1988, and even peaking at 98% in 1988 under the Chatchai Government. In the following period, it remained at 80% before falling to 75% under the Thanksin Government in 2001. The reality of Thai politics has shown that, although general elections have regularly been held, they are rarely reflected in the composition of the Thai cabinet (Tamada, Y., 2008, p.15). Only a few members of parliament belong to the cabinet as it is dominated by military officers and administrative officials. Therefore, increasing the number of elected members of parliament in the cabinet based on election results is a precondition for the democratisation process in Thailand. Accordingly, one way to identify the democratisation period is to look at changes in the proportion of members of parliament in the cabinet. It can be seen that the most important stage in the transition process to democracy was the period of Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda's administration from 1980 to 1988. During this period, the proportion of members of parliament in the cabinet increased to 42%, 56%, 73%, and 87% respectively after each cabinet reshuffle, and from 19% in the previous Kriangsak administration. The progress made under the Prem Government with royal, military and parliamentary members' support is considered a "managed transition". Drawing lessons from the failure of the mid-1970s, the democratisation process in the late 1970s was carried out from the top down. This process of "managed democratisation" was deviated from twice (due to the February 1991 military coup and the military's repression of the people in May 1992) but was quickly restored each time. Accordingly, since 1992 Thailand has been aiming for democratic consolidation.

There were two main aspects in the period of democratic transition under the Prem government. The first was the elimination of the threat from leftist forces. The second was

the emergence of a parliamentary democracy that represented capitalism without popular support or ideology. In addition, the Prem Government had to revive a stagnating economy at the time. Under Prem, it was the conservative forces that were able to secure democracy which was to their own benefit. The Prem Government had support not only from the military but also from the political parties, as shown by the allocation of cabinet positions. The outstanding achievement of the Prem administration was to solve the above two major problems. The period of 1980 to 1988 was marked by one of transition from military government to partisan politics, together with strengthening royal power and kick-starting economic recovery.

The process of democratisation in Thailand entered a period of democratic consolidation in the 1990s, marked by the general election in September 1992 resulting in a government led by Prime Minister Chuan Likphai's Democrat Party. It called for political reform and established the Democratic Development Committee in 1994. The next administration, led by the Thai Nation Party (Prime Minister Banhan Silpa-archa), decided to amend the constitution for political reform. The general election in November 1996 in which the New Aspiration Party (Phak Khwam Wang Mai) was victorious, led to the government of Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh. Under his administration, the 1997 Constitution was formulated and adopted. The constitution was intended to achieve the goals of political reform, including the expansion of the rights and freedoms of citizens; transforming a representative democracy into a participatory democracy of citizens, and ensuring that power was exercised honestly and reasonably in the administrative and political system by increasing the citizens' rights to monitor the effective performance of political power. In addition, the 1997 Constitution was designed to stabilise the government, strengthen the leadership role of the prime minister, and increase parliament's effectiveness. The 1997 Constitution is considered to be a "sweet fruit" of political reform efforts and an important milestone in the process of consolidating democracy in Thailand (Tamada, Y., 2008, p.257).

3.3. Nature of democracy and democratisation process in Thailand

Several approaches have been developed by scholars to study Thai democracy. In the beginning, the bureaucratic polity was the most popular approach that help shed light on Thai politics. Developed by Riggs in 1966, it was argued that Thai development was not geared toward the modernisation of politics but was a system with differences limited to the bureaucratic apparatus, and where the alternative power centres were deemed to be insecure and dependent. This approach paid less attention to the struggle outside the bureaucratic apparatus for democracy and the rights of representation. It saw polity as merely the place for political competition between the elites. Though the Thai elite is a very strong force, the focus on the elite itself meant that the political space for wider participation by workers, farmers and the middle class was constricted.

"The network monarchy" is another approach in the study of Thai politics, developed by McCargo in 2005. In McCargo's view, the leading Thai political network was closely linked to the king and centred on the former prime minister and incumbent head of the palace's Privy Council - Prem Tinsudanonda. It was also argued that the political order in Thailand was characterised by network-based politics, in which the monarchy control the most important political network. As McCargo argued, "the network monarchy is a semi-monarchical form of rule…", closely linked to the conservative and far-right forces. By 2005, McCargo saw that this system had come to an end: "By the beginning of Thaksin's second term of office, the informal political system of the network monarchy, which had operated for three decades, looked close to exhaustion". But in reality, those groups with links to the network monarchy were further empowered by the emergence of Thaksin and later became more united in their efforts to oppose governments that supported Thaksin. The term "the network monarchy" is used to refer to the key political forces in anti-Thaksin movements and the power of those closest to the monarchy. However, the network monarchy approach, with a focus on the central elite, is not sufficient to help understand the complexity of political struggle which is the key to understanding the nature of Thai politics and its trajectory.

When examining why the Thai military intervened too often in the country's politics, Paul Chambers and Napisa Waitoolkiat (2016) argued that it was important to look at the relationship between the monarchy and the military, rather than material and institutional benefits. This relationship was seen as representational of a parallel state in terms of decision making. In the meantime, the ideology, rituals and procedures in this relationship have led to a monarchist military. In such a parallel state, the primary task of national security was to protect the monarchy. The purpose of this relationship was to maintain a conservative political and social order that the monarchy preferred and at the same time give the military greater legitimacy.

In contrast to Chambers and Napisa's concept of a parallel state, Eugenie Merieau (2016) developed an alternative one called Deep State. Similar to the network monarchy, the "Deep State" model puts the monarchy in the centre. In the case of Thailand, Deep State should include low-ranking officials to the highest-ranking parliamentarians, who are all against the emergence of electoral politics. Those who sought to maintain and consolidate a special socio-economic and political order and in that order the monarchy was the central symbol. All the above approaches for studying Thai politics put emphasis on the central role of the elite, the military, and the monarchy. The latter two share the common view that they should oppose electoral politics because it could threaten the social order controlled by the elite (Veerayooth, K. & Kevin, H., 2017, p.4). Force correlation between the monarchy and the military changes over time. The Thai military had to rely on

Prem in the 2006 military coup. But in the 2014 coup, military leaders partly relied on Prem while also seeking to establish a direct relationship with the monarchy. After the 2014 military coup, Prayut proclaimed: "Thailand is different from other countries. If something cannot be solved, the military will solve it" (Veerayooth, K. & Kevin, H., 2017, p.69). At this point in time, the balance had been in favour of the military. It can be concluded that the monarchy, the military, and the elite have been the determinants of the nature of Thai politics. In addition, the socio-cultural factors played a role in deepening inequality as a characteristic of Thai society. These factors, which bore the undemocratic seeds, would also impact the struggle between the ruling elite and the majority of ordinary people.

The process of democratisation is the transition from a non-democratic regime to a democratic one. Therefore, the outcome or manifestation of the democratisation process will depend on the nature of each democracy. Based on the social class structure, sociologist Rueschemeyer argues that democracy, by its origins, will not achieve stability unless the rights and benefits of the elite are guaranteed (Dietrich, R., p.267). From this perspective, the democratisation process in Thailand, especially since the 1970s, seems to be one where the groups, "reluctant" to democratise, are those holding the key to democracy rather than the pro-democracy groups. In other words, if the democratisation process in Thailand is viewed as a consequence of political reform, then a political reform must not threaten the benefits of the Thai elite, including entrepreneurs, conservatives, and "royalists".

In the 1970s, in order to destroy the leftist forces, the conservatives and royalists supported the military coup, consequently ending the democratic regime in 1976 while establishing an autocratic one. Faced with the lack of legitimacy and the increasing influence of the Communist Party, Thailand restored democratic politics. However, it was important this did not threaten the conservative elite. In the 1970s to 1990s period, several small and medium-size conservative political parties were founded and largely funded by businessmen in Bangkok (Tamada, Y., 2008, p.257), such as the Thai Nation Party (established in 1974), the Rassadorn Party (established in 1986), and the New Aspiration Party (established in 1990). The majority of parliamentarians were either businessmen from the provinces or those who received support from the business community.

This situation was common because fundraising organisations do not feature in Thai partisan politics and there are no precedents for candidates to publicly spend time raising funds or donations. The non-existence of such a fund-raising system for candidates helps consolidate the power of the elite, paving the way for business to play a greater role in the country's politics. As Thaksin once proclaimed: "In the case of the Thai Rak Thai's donations, most comes from my own pocket" (Siripan, N. S., 2006, p.94). The following table shows the number and frequency of donations made to political parties in the 1998 to 2001 general elections.

Table 1: Donations to Political Parties (1998 to December 2001)

Political parties	Frequency	Total sum of donation
Thais Love Thais	92	417,619,687
Democrat	127	208,370,006
Thai Nation	61	157,681,600
National Development Party (Chart Pattana)	50	139,528,000
New Aspiration (Khwam Wang Mai)	55	93,270,940
Liberal Democratic (Seridham)	40	74,258,840
Rassadorn	13	53,780,000

Source: Siripan, N. S., 2006.

The consequence of the money-based political system is that ideology and policy were never discussed at election campaigns but the more important issue was the financial wealth needed to buy voters and canvassers, especially the rural electorate and lower-class voters in urban areas. The Thai party system and partisan politics have been hugely beneficial to businessmen in maintaining and promoting their interests. In another aspect, during the 1990s, the Thai middle class had gained an increasingly louder voice in politics. They criticised the partisan politics, seeing it as a money-based political system where businessmen buy political parties which in turn buy parliamentarians who in turn buy votes. The middle class supported political reform with the idea of clean, efficient, and stable politics. While, at first glance, Thailand's middle class appeared to be reformist, it was in fact as conservative as the middle class in other Asian countries and allied itself with the upper class.

The political reforms, together with the partisan politics that began to take root in Thailand in the 1990s, also allayed middle-class discontent as well as opened new potentials toward a more mass democratic system with wider participation in politics by the people. Thus, the primary feature of political reform, or the democratisation process in Thailand, was the successful conversion of the elites to supporting democratisation, who were "reluctant" to reform. In other words, the appeasement of those who otherwise could be anti-democracy in Thai society. The second prominent feature of Thai democracy is its relative stability. This stemmed from Thailand's relatively stable politics since the late 1970s. This was due to three reasons: (1) the process of democratisation had progressed gradually by appeasing its critics; (2) Thai politics features only conservative parties and no leftists; and (3) government instability. Democratisation in Thailand is not a direct product of radical movements but rather the result of attempts to gradually remove the sharp

edges from radical demands. As mentioned above, this process requires satisfying the demands of the opponents of democracy. In addition, a contributing factor to the stability of the Thai political system is the instability of the government. This fact helps prevent political parties and politicians from centralising power, thus facilitating a compromise situation for bringing about conflicting benefits, which consequently indirectly helps stabilise the political system.

From the above two characteristics of the Thai democracy, a conclusion can tentatively be drawn that the democratic transformation has led to a democratisation process that is both conciliatory and conservatively stable.

4. Relationship between party system and democratisation process in Thailand

The relationship between the Thai party system and democratisation can be evaluated in the overall relationship and impacts of the partisan politics in Thailand on the democratisation process. In general, the partisan politics is a political activity involving political parties. Since the 1980s, the partisan politics in Thailand has had the following characteristics:

Firstly, all that was established was by order of the conservative parties only. The government's policy was not changed much regardless of the party in power. *Secondly*, the parties did not make any significant efforts to attract voters. They did not seek to increase the number of party members nor advocate any attractive policies. There was no party relying on religious, regional, class, or ethnic differences in their election campaigns; electoral politics did not create or amplify social divisions. *Thirdly*, the political parties were totally focused on buying powerful candidates in advance of each election in order to increase their number of seats in parliament. Therefore, the political parties had to pay more attention to those who could provide funds for this purpose rather than focus on voters in general. *Fourthly*, the establishments of mechanisms through which parties buy off candidates, candidates buy off voting brokers, and voting brokers buy off voters. These mechanisms kept the political parties and governments detached from the voters, allowing the partisan politics, in a sense, to separate from the electorate. This meant the political parties could remain unresponsive to the needs of voters.

Given the above-mentioned characteristics of the partisan politics in Thailand and from the point of view that the dominant classes only accept democracy if it protects their benefits, the Thai party system is a system that favours patron-client relationships. A party system where the parties represent multiple classes without ideology, along with a strong presence of the conservative political parties, would be an appropriate system that meets the essence of Thai democracy. In other words, this explains exactly how the party system has been formed in Thailand.

Based on the evaluation criteria of the level of institutionalisation of the political party system, it shows that the Thai party system, with a high degree of fragmentation and frequent changes (in the number, the formation, disbanding, and dissolution of parties) is weakly institutionalised. In view of the relationship between the level of institutionalisation of the party system and democratic consolidation, the Thai party system has not played an essential role in the democratisation process in Thailand. Weak establishments lie at the root of Thailand's democracy problems. Institutions are weak partly because the attraction of personalism is too strong, hindering the establishment of non-personal institutions. Therefore, to consolidate democracy, Thailand particularly needs a stronger legal system and a more deeply institutionalised party system (Daniel, H. U. & Chandra, M., 2016, p.206).

5. Conclusion

To answer the question of why the democratic consolidation process in Thailand has been difficult, it is first necessary to elucidate the nature of Thai democracy and its drivers. Since abandoning the autocratic monarchy in 1932, the development of Thai democracy must be based on the principle of ensuring the benefits of the politically dominant class in Thai society and protecting the interests of the elite as well as the business community. The democratisation process can be described as "top-down democratisation" or "managed democratisation", because it goes hand in hand with the reconciliation process (Tamada, Y., 2008, p.259). From the point of view of many Thais, three factors make it difficult for their country to consolidate democracy, including too many coups; weak institutions; and a populace lacking appropriate education on civil responsibilities necessary for democracy. As institutions accompanying democratisation, Thai political parties and the party system are shaped and influenced by drivers of the democratisation process and the features of Thai party politics. Based on the characteristics of Thai political parties, it can be seen that with high fragmentation and weak institutionalisation, the Thai political party system has not played the role of an essential institution for the democratisation process in Thailand.

Note: Translator: Nguyen Viet Cuong. Language editor: Stella Ciorra.

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