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The Rise and Fall of Electoral Violence in Thailand: Changing Rules, Structures, and Power Landscapes, 1997- 2011

Prajak Kongkirati

This paper examines how patterns of electoral violence in Thailand from 1997-2011 were shaped by the rise of the *Thai Rak Thai* Party and Thaksin, the changing roles and status of provincial elites, the 2006 coup, and the emergence of the Yellow Shirt and the Red Shirt movements. The main focus is on the combination of factors that led to increasingly widespread violence in the 2001 and 2005 elections, and the decrease in electoral violence in 2007 and 2011. The major goal is to identify the mechanisms, patterns, and consequences of violence in electoral politics and why it erupted in 2001 and 2005 and dissipated in 2007 and 2011.

National political restructuring, local power reordering, and fluctuation of electoral violence

Thailand witnessed the two most violent elections in modern Thai history in the 2001 and 2005 elections. The number of incidents, death toll and injuries surpassed other elections' records. Meanwhile, the intensity of electoral violence significantly dropped in the 2007 and 2011 elections (see table 1). The 2007 election was, in fact, one of the most peaceful elections in Thailand. Compared to constant levels of violence from 1979 to 1997, there was sharp fluctuation over the period 1997-2011. Major structural and institutional changes that came into effect after 1997 (constitution, electoral and party system, civil-military relations, and political party-social movement linkages) caused these ups and downs.

The period from 1997 to 2011 was highly transformative and turbulent for Thai politics and society. Within one decade, there were five elections (including the nullified 2006 election), six prime ministers, two constitutions, one military coup, and countless violent clashes between state security forces and color-coded mass movements which led to a large number of deaths and injuries. Parliamentary democracy and electoral institutions underwent a dramatic change. Initially, the new constitution and political reform produced a strong and

stable civilian administration and political party structure. Programmatic politics and policy-based campaigning played increasingly important roles in shaping electoral outcomes, even though the particularistic elements of patronage, pork, personality, and coercive force still existed. Political party and electoral institutions were, more than ever, strengthened and meaningfully connected to a majority of the electorate. Direct elections at the local level enabled by decentralization helped created stronger linkages between the electorate and elected politicians. However, the military coup in 2006 derailed the legitimacy and development of parliamentary democracy. The traditional royal-military-bureaucratic power alliance, which lost its power but had no willingness to participate in electoral competition, employed an old-fashioned, coercive tool (the coup) to capture state power and overthrow the popularly elected government. The 2006 coup profoundly transformed Thai politics; it polarized the country, exacerbated political divisions, and radicalized political participation. As a result, electoral competitions were infused with ideological contestation, rather than only particularistic or programmatic campaigns. The changing rules, landscape and power structure of Thai politics at the national level strongly effected local political settings—the balance of power between political groups and families, and between national parties and local bosses. And the political changes at the local level, structured by national dynamics, shaped the supply and demand of coercion and electoral violence witnessed in this period.

Table 1: Election-related violence in national polls, 2001-2011¹

Election dates	Violent incidents						Death toll	Wounded
	assassination attempts	fight, clashes, brawls, scuffles	physical intimidation	Bombings	burnings	total	total	total
6/1/2001	39	7	26	7	2	81	26	84
6/2/2005	44	3	25	3	2	77	30	16
23/12/2007	14	1	7	0	1	23	10	4
3/7/2011	20	12	16	8	0	56	14	16
Total	117	23	74	18	5	237	80	120

To understand the peaks and troughs of violence in this period, it is necessary to examine political and institutional changes at the national level and how these affect local power structures. Three national-level factors contributed to the transformation of Thai politics and patterns of electoral violence from 1997 to 2011: the 1997 constitution and its newly designed electoral system; the rise of the strong populist party and Thaksin Shinawatra; and the 2006 military coup. The rest of the paper examines and analyzes how each of these factors cause the fluctuation of electoral violence from 1997-2011.

The new electoral administration and system and the 1997 constitution: changing rules and unintended (violent) consequences

The political reform movement began after the 1992 May bloodshed. The reformists defined money politics and vote buying, as well as weak coalition government, as the core problems of Thai politics. Just as importantly, they viewed the provincial businessmen-cum-politicians as the main culprits for the problems. Journalists and academics deplored rural politicians, accusing them of using “dirty” money to buy votes from rural poor, uneducated voters. They were accused of plundering public resources to win elections and to gain personal benefits. Immediately after the economic crisis of July 1997, the push for political reform galvanized vital support from the urban middle class, civil society, and business elites as they blamed the crisis on incompetent government run by rural politicians. In October 1997, the legislative assembly passed a new constitution. The primary goals of the new constitution were twofold— to create a capable and stable government and eradicate vote buying and money politics.² The unspoken goal, however, was to prevent provincial politicians from assuming power, as had occurred earlier in the 1990s.

To curb the power of provincial and money politics, the constitutional drafters redesigned the electoral system, election administration and rules over party organization.³ The new constitution replaced the Ministry of the Interior with an independent body, the Election Commission of Thailand (ECT), tasked with administering and overseeing electoral processes. The ECT was mandated to investigate violations of electoral law and misconduct, and it had the power to counter electoral fraud by disqualifying candidates before or after voting day. These sweeping powers effectively made the ECT one of the key players shaping electoral results—and effectively a gatekeeper to the House. Especially in the first election

held under the new constitution, in 2001, the ECT's lack of experience and capacity, combined with unclear rules and mismanagement, became sources of conflict.

Apart from creating the ECT, the 1997 constitution adopted several new organizations, mechanisms, and rules. For the first time in history, it set forth that senators be elected directly rather than being appointed. Voting was compulsory for all eligible voters and party switching, a popular practice among Thai politicians, was restricted. However, the most far-reaching reform was a major overhaul of the electoral system. As part of an attempt to facilitate coherent political party and party-oriented politics, it replaced the block-vote system (used under the 1978 and 1992 constitutions) with a mixed-member or two-tiered system.⁴ Out of five hundred House seats, four hundred seats were elected from single-seat districts on a plurality basis (or first past the post, FPTP), and another one hundred seats were elected from a single nationwide district on a proportional basis. All political parties had to submit a list of candidates for voters to consider and those on the party list were ranked in order. Each candidate had to decide whether they ran for a constituency or a party list seat, and each voter cast one vote for their district representative and another for a party list. The constituency and party list votes were calculated separately and had no effect on each other. The introduction of a party-list system aimed to provide an opportunity for technocrats, businessmen, professionals or basically non-provincial boss-type candidates to enter politics without electioneering. It also aimed to strengthen party building and party identity.

The drafters believed that changing to the FPTP system would reduce vote buying; because districts were smaller, they reasoned, candidates would be able to cultivate close relationships with their constituents without dispensing particularistic material benefits, or cash. The goal was also to allow non-affluent but quality candidates to compete with influential bosses. Another advantage of the FPTP system, claimed by the drafters, was its lack of intraparty competition (which typically occurred in the block vote's multiple-seat districts).⁵ Despite the advantages of the FPTP system on party building and vote buying reduction, it created negative unintended consequences. It intensified electoral conflict in many provinces.

In general, there were no direct causal links between the FPTP system and the frequency of electoral violence; no study demonstrates or proves that the adoption of this straightforward electoral system leads to more electoral violent conflict.⁶ Nevertheless, the sequence and context of the introduction of FPTP voting in Thailand encouraged greater levels of violence.

It is critical to emphasize that the FPTP was taken up after Thailand's long standing use of the block-vote system. The block-vote system helped diminish the intensity of electoral competitions by allowing strong candidates to avoid head-on confrontation with each other as it was unnecessary to win the most votes to get elected. For example, in a two-seat district with two rivals standing, both of them could collect just enough votes to win the first and second position to get elected. In the FPTP system, the competition becomes a zero-sum-game as there is only one winner per district— only the strongest boss could go to the House. Theoretically, the best way for the boss to escape defeat is to avoid running in the same district as their main rival, but this is not an option for everyone. After competing under the same electoral system for decades, each political boss or family had successfully established their own political stronghold, usually their hometown or business headquarters. Running in new districts means rebuilding vote bases and cultivating new personal support networks— tasks that normally take years to accomplish. Therefore the implementation of the new electoral system aggravated existing local conflicts among influential bosses and made elections more prone to violence, precisely in districts in which redrawn electoral boundaries pit two rival bosses against each other. Since the political reformists were primarily focused on vote-buying, they overlooked the violent consequences of the newly-adopted system and prepared no plan to mitigate conflict.⁷

While the new electoral system was implemented nationwide, not every district faced violent competition. The FPTP intensified political cleavages but was not a direct cause of electoral violence. The real causes resided in local settings—existing local political arrangements and the ways in which each political boss responded to the changing institutional rules.

The rise of the populist party: New political actors and the goal of political monopolization

The economic crisis and the new constitution created strong incentives as well as opportunities for national-level capitalists to form political parties and capture state power. The emergence of the Thai Rak Thai Party and its participation in national elections after 2001 dramatically changed the landscape of Thai electoral politics. The TRT introduced party-based and relatively more policy-oriented politics, a new style of electoral campaigning, and the ambitious goal of creating a single-party government. Electoral competition thus changed along with the relationship between the political parties and provincial bosses. The political changes brought about by the TRT placed provincial elites in

a new socio-political environment, forcing them to adjust their strategies accordingly.

Thaksin Shinawatra (1950-), a telecommunication business tycoon-turned politician, founded the Thai Rak Thai Party in 1998. By the mid 1990s, he became a rising star businessman and an advocate for economic and political reforms. He launched his political career after the Bloody May 1992 event by accepting an invitation to join Chamlong Srimuang's Phalang Tham Party, eventually becoming Phalang Tham Party's head. The party's clean, professional image affected few voters and its popularity did not go beyond Bangkok. Thaksin deserted the party after the 1996 election.⁸

After the 1997 economic crisis and the promulgation of the new constitution, Thaksin launched the Thai Rak Thai Party, aiming to be the first prime minister elected in the post-reform era. The 1997 crisis, as explained by scholars, created strong incentives for prominent capitalists, including Thaksin, to directly capture state power. "Business was shocked by the severity of economic slump, and by the refusal of the Democrat Party government (1997-2001) to assume any responsibility for defending domestic capital against its impact," Thani and Pasuk explain. "The growing role of the stock market as a generator of wealth and the increased globalization of business raised the potential returns from holding the office of prime minister."⁹ Thaksin led a group of national-level capitalists, who were not severely damaged by the crisis, in pursuing a high-risk high-return path of direct ownership over their own party, rather than building clientelistic relations with leading bureaucrats and politicians or sponsoring other people's parties.¹⁰ The new electoral and party system, as explained above, was designed to promote strong executive power and large political parties. This, in turn, facilitated their political ambitions.

The TRT was highly successful in both the 2011 and 2005 elections. A number of studies have explained Thaksin's political success.¹¹ I will focus specifically on the impact of Thaksin and his party on local power structures and provincial bosses' political strategies as they affected the changing demand and supply of electoral violence. Thaksin's political project and the TRT reshaped local political settings in three significant ways: changing the balance of power among political bosses and families in each province; intensifying extant conflicts among them; and making provincial bosses' social and political standings more vulnerable.

Thaksin had a different strategy from other political oligarchs of the pre-1997 period. Rather than trying to win a plurality of votes and sharing power with other leaders in a multi-party coalition, he sought to win an absolute majority of votes and form a single-party government. In other words, he and his party strove for monopolistic control instead of the more conventional mode of sharing power. To achieve this goal, he reached out to establish political alliances with prominent provincial bosses in all regions. Phalangtham Party's failure in the early 1990s had taught him that elections were won outside Bangkok. TRT recruited, as core members responsible for formulating party strategies and policies, technocrats, bankers, academics, businessmen, retired civil servants, judges, activists, and former student leaders. But when the election approached, Thaksin called upon a different type of person—the provincial political lord. The most important were bosses from Phrae and Sa Kaeo, Narong Wongwan and Sanoh Thienthong. Both were old-fashioned, anti-reformists who controlled two of the largest factions in the country.¹² The public decried the inclusion of these two (and also other upcountry godfathers), saying they tainted the party image. Thaksin disregarded the criticism.

As a practical businessman-turned-politician, Thaksin persistently fielded top bosses in constituency seats on the understanding that the FPTP electoral system was, by and large, a candidate-centered system. The TRT party ran a complementary two-pronged campaign strategy—a party-list centered campaign for the party-list seats and a candidate-centered campaign for constituency seats. Electoral results from many districts demonstrated that the popularity of the party's policies boosted the candidates' standing and assisted their win.¹³ It was clear, however, that the personalistic strategies did not entirely disappear in post-1997 politics. TRT candidates who belonged to eminent political clans relied on both the party brand and their family networks. What was new was Thaksin and TRT's direct intervention in altering the balance of power among provincial politicians. Their large financial and political support bases helped bosses allied with the TRT to gain the upper hand over rival bosses. The political struggle for monopoly was less daunting for the TRT-supported bosses. Those provincial bosses who refused to cooperate with the TRT, on the other hand, faced difficulty. Some of them, indeed, struggled for their political survival. The political dynamic of fighting for monopoly and survival between bosses usually produced violent outcomes. Only in provinces in which all powerful bosses agreed to unite under TRT that the elections were peaceful. Otherwise, the intervention of the TRT and Thaksin created violence. For example, peaceful scenarios occurred in Nakhon Sawan and Buriram in the 2005 election

when all bosses worked together under the TRT. Both provinces, however, had violent elections in 2001. Phrae and Nakhon Si Thammarat faced electoral violence in both the 2001 and 2005 elections because the TRT failed to gain local bosses' unanimous support.

Thaksin and his party also disrupted existing local political markets. TRT's massive war chest and popular policies attracted many politicians and vote canvassers. There was large-scale migration to the TRT during the run-up to the 2001 election.¹⁴ The TRT's forceful entry into the unstable, volatile local political market intensified political divisions and weakened the extant patron-client relationships. Vote canvassers were quick to notice the changing political surrounding and voters' mood. As a result, most of them wanted to support the TRT. Things went smoothly in cases when their bosses agreed to run under the TRT, but conflict arose when bosses refused Thaksin's offer. Many vote canvassers defected. The fragile clientelistic relationships broke down, and violence erupted. TRT's efforts to build a strong political machine in a short period of time aggravated political divisions. The volatile situation continued and intensified in the lead up to the 2005 election, when the TRT brand was at its peak and Thaksin announced his party's ambition to win 75-80 percent of parliamentary seats (instead of nearly 50 percent as in 2001) and form a single-party government.¹⁵ The number of politicians intending to run under the TRT banner exceeded the number of available seats in each province. Therefore many people were denied party support, including several former TRT candidates. The TRT replaced several old candidates with new ones more likely to win. Some newly-recruited candidates were, in fact, formerly enemies of the party in the 2001 election. Because of a high turnover of party nominated candidates, the political market in each province remained highly unstable and fluctuating. In sum, the 2005 electoral competition was fraught with defections, betrayals, and intra-personal network conflicts that led to a large number of violent incidents.

Lastly, the rise of Thaksin and the populist Thai Rak Thai weakened the political standing of provincial godfathers. After winning in a landslide in 2001 and becoming a highly popular leader, Thaksin pursued a bold strategy to domesticate the power of leading provincial political bosses both within and outside his party. Within TRT, Thaksin sidelined factional leaders since he did not want any bosses to have too much control over party members. Thaksin played the classic game of divide and rule by pitting factions within his party against each other so that no single boss posed a threat to government stability or his supremacy. Prominent cabinet members mainly came from his inner circle, were family-connected allies,

or technocrats and professionals, and Thaksin frequently rotated or reshuffled his cabinet members. With less access to ministerial posts and thus rent allocations, the position of provincial bosses significantly declined under the Thaksin administration. Certain disgruntled bosses expressed their grievances and mounted an-intra party campaign against Thaksin's strong rule, but they gained insufficient support from public and party members. People discredited their acts as old-style, self-serving politics.

Furthermore, Thaksin capitalized on the popularity and success of the "war on drugs" policy to implement the "war on influential people."¹⁶ The government launched this policy on 20 May 2003, seeking the suppression of influential figures who were accused of obstructing his campaign to combat drugs, poverty and corruption. In his policy-launching speech, Thaksin explained the urgency and necessity of this policy,¹⁷

What we are aiming to do is establishing true democracy... which is democracy without brokers. Influence must be eradicated. I want to use this opportunity to destroy [the influence] system so the political party can truly belong to the people.

He proceeded to explain what he meant by the term influential people (*phu mi itthiphon*): "my definition is simple, influential figures are the ones who use gunmen or officials or political power to harass and oppress people for their own illegal interests." Whereas, "in the past influential figures were subordinates to officials but then they got stronger and became officials' bosses."¹⁸ Then Thaksin identified hired gunmen, illegal gamblers, smugglers, drugs and human trafficking, illicit loggers, and illegal construction bidders as the policy's primary targets. He then asked all influential figures to stop enriching themselves from the illegal and/or underground economy, otherwise the government was going to employ strong-arm tactics to stop them: "government cannot give license to people to do bad things... I can assure you that I will be just. My party members also have to be under the rules of equal protection under the same law... I had no necessity to do this for political gain." On another occasion, in his weekly "meet the prime minister" television program on 13 December 2003, he asked government officials to undertake tough action against national and local mafia-cum-politicians, "You have to adhere strictly to the law. If someone claims they are friends of the government party or powerful figure, you do not have to listen to them. Just ignore them".¹⁹

Like the war on drugs, the war on influential figures had massive support from the Thai public as they thought it tackled a social problem that gravely affected their livelihoods and safety.²⁰ Immediately after Thaksin's speech, the government set up the national commission for the suppression of influential people, fully mobilizing all important state agencies to support this policy: the Interior Ministry, Ministry of Justice, police and military forces, Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC), Special Branch police, National Security Council, National Intelligence Agency, and Office of the Narcotics Control Board. The center further identified fifteen subcategories of "influential people" consisting of drug traffickers, illegal construction bidders; protection/extortion gangs; illicit goods smugglers; gambling den owners; sex trading mafias; human traffickers; natural resources plunderers; hired gunmen; debt collecting gangs; contraband arms traders, and fraudsters. The authority divided the influential people into three levels— village, provincial, and national. The national- level mafia was considered the most dangerous, beyond the capacity of the provincial bureaucratic apparatus, and thus required the employment of the national-operated task forces.²¹

Provincial governors and police chiefs implemented this policy. They were responsible for making lists of provincial influential people and submitting it to the national center. The process of list making was full of confusion, lobbying and political maneuvering. In almost every province, the provincial governor and police chief applied different criteria and attempted to outperform one another. Hence each unit came up with their own list and reported it separately to the national commission. In some provinces, bosses lobbied and/or coerced the authorities to remove their name from the list in exchange for benefits. Some corrupt officials also deleted the names of provincial godfathers, who were their friends, and put their enemies' names on the list instead.²²

The first lists compiled by provincial offices, released on 9 June 2003, indicated that there was a total of 813 influential people nationwide, 61 of whom were government officials. The suggestion that 32 provinces were without influential bosses, was widely criticized. Political observers said number of people listed was too low, and it was inconceivable that bosses did not exist in 32 provinces, notably notorious Chonburi and Phrae.²³ The public also commented that no "mafia police" or "mafia soldiers" were on the list.²⁴ Thaksin was furious with the original list, saying the number was too low and some obvious names did not appear on it. "It reflected that provincial governors were either afraid or under patronage of big

mafias,” he commented. He asked for a new list and threatened to demote local officials who failed to implement this policy effectively.²⁵ With strong political will from the prime minister, government officials carried out this policy forcefully. Two weeks later, the national commission came out with an updated list, increasing the total number of influential people to 2,700.²⁶

Even though this was national policy covering the vast scope of criminality in Thailand, in practice it was a selective provincial-based operation, with the ultimate aim of eliminating or weakening the political networks of provincial strongmen. This political agenda became obvious when the commission developed specific strategies to suppress the “dark influence” and actual targets. The commission explained it would suppress those “who acted above and against the law and operated as a network,” rather than targeting petty criminals. According to the commission, influential networks comprised of three components: gang leaders/bosses; “troops” or “tools” (hired gunmen, hoodlums); and supporters (corrupt government officials).²⁷

In a nutshell, the “war on influential people” was Thaksin’s political attempt to demolish the political and coercive infrastructure of provincial bosses. It targeted both the local demand for and supply of electoral violence. Moreover, it aimed to destroy the economic base of provincial bosses by suppressing the illegal economy, and in the process enhance the popularity, legitimacy, and revenue of the government. For example, while suppressing illegal casinos and underground lotteries, the Thaksin government increased government lotteries and legalized the online lottery. As a result, government collected more revenue and used the money for charity and poor student scholarships, boosting Thaksin’s populism.²⁸

The real intent of the policy was to weaken political brokers and/or intermediaries so that Thaksin’s TRT party could relate directly to voters. If the policy succeeded, Thaksin could gain control over provincial MPs both within and outside his party. It was a political strategy to undermine his political enemies, force opposition members to join the TRT, and tame recalcitrant TRT factional leaders. By bypassing local brokers, Thaksin could rely on party policies, branding, and the party machine to win votes, instead of local personal networks. Undoubtedly, the populist tycoon changed the system to serve his ambitious, personal goals. In the process, however, this policy campaign helped bring forth a political transformation from provincial-boss dominated, factional politics to party-dominated, policy-oriented

politics led by a populist leader.

Therefore it is only partly correct to understand the war on influential people as Thaksin's attack on his political opponents.²⁹ This policy was more ambitious—it was part of his larger political project of reorganizing power structures and monopolizing the political market. Thaksin's policy targeted powerful figures, notably political bosses and their key vote canvassers from all political parties, including TRT. The areas targeted were provinces dominated by opposition parties and the provinces controlled by TRT MPs who appeared to be too independent. Police were active in many southern provinces, notably Nakhon Si Thammarat, Trang, Surathani, Satun, Phang Nga, Phuket, Democrat Party strongholds.³⁰ Suphanburi, the stronghold of Banharn Silapa-archa Chart Thai Party's head, was also targeted. A task force of 200 policemen raided 15 houses, seized weapons and arrested three people on charges of possessing firearms. All those arrested were Chart Thai Party's vote canvassers. In Samutprakarn, police arrested a number of local politicians and seized heavy weapons; most of those arrested were connected to the Atsawahem family, a powerful political dynasty who had dominated the province for decades.³¹ But the two provinces which were the commission's main focus were Phrae and Kanchanaburi, the two polarized provinces that the TRT had struggled to monopolize. In the 2001 elections, the Democrat Party fiercely contested the TRT's attempt to grab all seats in these two provinces but neither gained monopoly control.³²

Thaksin chose Kanchanaburi as the pilot province for his campaign, saying it contained the highest number of mafia, hired guns, illegal arms traders, natural exploiters, and protection racketeers. "We are going to wipe out all of them [influential people]," said the Defense Minister, "in Kanchanburi, mafia are connected and backed up by MPs. We will beat them up. Believe me, the locals will not vote for them in the next election."³³ In early July 2003, police conducted house raids on two leading Democrat MPs, Pracha Phothiphiphit and Paiboon Pimphisitthawon, accusing them of being involved in the murder of TRT's key vote canvassers. Both were former *kamnan*-turned-businessmen who had risen to power by enriching themselves from business enterprises. They were respected and feared among the tough guys and underworld community in Kanchanaburi. After the 2001 election, many vote canvassers were murdered in the province over conflict between these two *kamnans* and the TRT members.³⁴ Knowing they were dealing with influential bosses, the government also used certain legal tools (prosecutions for money laundering, tax evasion, etc.) to supplement

the use of tough force. In early October, the police issued arrest warrants for Pracha and his wife on charges of using coercive force against other contractors in construction bidding and also accused them of being mafia leaders. Fearing he was next in line, Paiboon sent a signal to Thaksin that he wanted to make a political deal. A few months later, Paiboon went to greet Thaksin and other ministers when the cabinet had a special meeting in Kanchanaburi. In front of journalists, Thaksin told Paiboon, “Do not worry. You will be an opposition member for just a little while.”³⁵ In the 2005 election, Paiboon abandoned his teammate Pracha, switching to TRT and helped them defeat the Democrat Party. Meanwhile, Pracha and his wife were convicted and given 5-year sentences for manipulating bidding, and their assets were seized by the authorities.³⁶

The campaign targeted many other boss-style politicians or those affiliated with political bosses. At the campaign’s peak from May to December 2003, many prominent godfathers found themselves embattled. Some of them were put under investigation, arrested and/or convicted, some mysteriously disappeared or went into exile, and a few of them were shot dead by unknown assassins. The media called 2003 “the year of the godfathers’ obliteration.”³⁷ In the end, most of the embattled bosses decided to move to TRT.³⁸ A Democrat female godmother and Phrae MP, Siriwan Pratsachaksattru, put up a strong fight against Thaksin and his campaign. She was a major obstacle to TRT’s effort to achieve a power monopoly in Phrae, and the TRT made use of the war on influential people policy (among other political tools) to weaken her power base. Political warfare between them turned highly violent. When the Democrats came out to defend Siriwan and Pracha, Thaksin retorted,

The Democrat party should not protect the wrongdoers. If a party sponsors godfathers, the party faces a problem. The TRT party is no exception. If any members acted like godfathers and did not stop, they would be punished. I would not keep them in the party.³⁹

To the surprise of many, Thaksin largely kept his promise. In many TRT strongholds, police searched TRT vote canvassers’ houses and arrested local politicians who were political aides of TRT’s MPs.⁴⁰ By the end of 2003, Thaksin had succeeded in asserting absolute control over all leading bosses in his party. He became the boss of bosses. His aggressive policy tools, though controversial, were effective. His government continued to suppress influential

people in 2004, but in a less spectacular fashion. Police revitalized the operation a few weeks before the February 2005 general election, focusing on suppressing local bosses and gunmen (especially in the south), justifying it as an attempt to make the election free, fair, and peaceful.⁴¹ When campaigning started, all opposition parties and bosses were already demoralized as they struggled to protect their fragile political territory. Thaksin and his party machine, by contrast, entered the 2005 election with confidence and emerged resounding winners. The 2005 election was far from peaceful. The national political struggle shaped local political dynamics by turning competition in many districts into electoral warfare pitting those seeking to assert a monopoly against those seeking to protect their turf.

The Thaksin administration was the first in modern Thai history to attempt to domesticate and eliminate local bosses who had, for many decades, acted as political intermediaries in the Thai political system. Past governments, both dictatorial and democratic regimes, either had no political will, legitimacy or capacity to pursue this goal. The military-led governments (1947-1973, 1991-1992) lacked determination to suppress the local strongmen. The army leaders never perceived provincial bosses as political threats, as all provincial bosses were relatively weak in comparison to the army. Also, they needed provincial bosses to assume the role of political broker for the military-supported parties. Semi-democratic and civilian administrations in the 1980s and 1990s would have never dreamt of using such a strategy as it would have destroyed their fundamental powerbases. For Thaksin, by contrast, provincial bosses posed a threat to his populist party-building and he knew that his electoral success would be more sustainable without reliance on local godfathers. The implementation of this policy reflected the emergence of a new type of politics and a new relationship between Thaksin, who was a national businessman-cum-populist party leader, and provincial businessmen-cum-politicians.

Ironically, precisely by the time Thaksin had achieved his monopolistic control over electoral politics, he had rendered himself vulnerable to another sort of threat. His royal-military-bureaucratic opponents understood that the only way to unseat Thaksin was by non-electoral, extra-parliamentary means. The monopolistic political market created the realization among his enemies that it was impossible to defeat him in electoral games. All major opposition parties boycotted the 2006 general election. In September 2006, the royal-military alliance staged a coup to topple Thaksin. This historic coup transformed Thai politics into a new era, and once again changed the political landscape at both the national and local levels.

The 2006 coup aftermath: the militarization and ideological struggle of Thai politics

While the landslide 2005 election victory and single-party government brought self-confidence and political aggrandizement to Thaksin, it generated fear and perturbation among his opponents. Since 2001, Thaksin and his party had succeeded in undermining rival political parties' power bases and provincial politicians' territorial power. But Thaksin had not been able to subvert extra-parliamentary forces, in particular the royalist networks and the military—an alliance constituting the most formidable sources of traditional power in the Thai polity.

Soon after the 2005 election, those opposing Thaksin (business rivals and personal foes, NGO activists, journalists, academics, human right defenders, and the urban middle class) joined forces against his government. By early 2006, Thaksin's legitimacy was eroded by his controversial business dealings, and the anti-government movement led by media mogul Sondhi Limthongkul and Maj. Gen. Chamlong Srimuang gained crucial momentum.⁴² In an attempt to revitalize his legitimacy, the embattled prime minister dissolved parliament and called for a snap election in April 2006. All main opposition parties (the Democrat Party, the Chart Thai Party and the Mahachon Party) decided to boycott the election, leaving the TRT party running unopposed. Political party leaders claimed that Thaksin no longer had legitimacy and the snap election was only Thaksin's attempt to divert public attention from his business scandal. The sudden dissolution, they argued, also left opposition parties no time to prepare for an election campaign.⁴³ After the release of the election results, showing that the Thai Rak Thai Party won 460 of the 500 seats, anti-Thaksin leaders declared that they did not accept the results and "would go on rallying until Thaksin resigns and Thailand gets a royally-appointed prime minister."⁴⁴ The political situation reached an impasse.

Unexpectedly, on 25 April 2006, the king gave speeches to groups of senior judges from the Administrative and Supreme Courts, questioning the democratic nature of the April general election. He commented that dissolving parliament and calling a snap election (within thirty days) might have not been correct in the first place. At the end of his speeches, the king called on the judges and those from the Constitutional Court to work together to resolve the current political crisis.⁴⁵ Certainly, the king's speeches constituted royal intervention in the midst of the crisis. Two weeks later, the Constitutional Courts nullified the April 2006

election, and ordered a new election.⁴⁶ The Thaksin cabinet decided to hold it on 15 October 2006. This scheduled election never took place.

On 19 September 2006, a group of army leaders staged a coup, the first in fifteen years. The timing of the coup was significant; it occurred a month before the proposed election. The coup makers clearly wanted to halt the electoral process. In this sense, the 2006 coup fits the definition of electoral violence as “an act or threat of coercion, intimidation, or physical harm perpetrated to affect an electoral process, of which violence may be employed to influence the *process* of elections – such as efforts to delay, disrupt, or derail a poll.”⁴⁷ It was the first time in Thai history that the coup was carried out with the intention of directly interfering in the electoral process.⁴⁸ The post-1997 style of electoral politics had become a major threat to the royal-military alliance’s standing. The alliance could not beat Thaksin and his political machine at an election. Thai elites, thereby changing the mode of the game, staged a coup to eliminate Thaksin. The consequences of the coup were drastic. From 2006-2011, political contestation moved from the electoral arenas to the street. This changed the mode of conflict and the pattern of political violence, as state and street violence took the place of electoral violence.

Many pundits and coup-supporters praised the 2006 coup for its bloodless nature. As political events unfolded, however, it was clear that this coup was the most violent in Thai history, in terms of its subsequent implications. The coup led to a large number of deaths and injuries as it exacerbated conflict, deepened political polarization, and created widespread confrontation between security forces and demonstrators and among opposing groups of protestors. Looking at the political phenomena Thai society has witnessed since the coup, one can see the emergence of many different forms of violence: the growth of militant social movements (both the Yellow and the Red Shirts); the use of gangs and thugs in political confrontation; the presence and involvement of paramilitary forces (either affiliated with the movement or acting independently) in protests; violent clashes between protesters affiliated with different movements; the resurgence of the politicized army and its violent suppression of citizens; the selective use of force by security groups in dealing with protesters; the use of snipers by the army to kill protesters; the assassinations of mass movement leaders in broad daylight under the emergency decree; the assassination of rogue soldiers; assassination attempts and intimidation of privy council members, prime ministers, judges, and election commissioners; bombings in the capital targeting government buildings and the protest sites; the wide use of

war weapons on all sides of conflict (M16, AK-47 and M79); and conflict within the army and between the army and the police.

The April-May 2010 military crackdown, when the government ordered the army to suppress the Red Shirt demonstration led by the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) who occupied some areas of central Bangkok between March and May 2010, marked the culmination of political violence. The confrontation between the military and the Red Shirts around the perimeter of the protest site ended up in the violent crackdown on 19 May 2010, killing 94 people and wounding thousands.⁴⁹

The locations, methods, perpetrators and victims of violent incidents in the post-coup era indicate a new pattern of violence in Thailand. The army has returned to the political theater as the main actor, committing the most violent acts and being responsible for a high proportion of the death toll. The April-May 2010 crackdown represented the most violent political suppression in modern Thai history, with an official death toll exceeding those of the three previous political crises: the student-led uprising in 1973, the massacre in 1976 and the pro-democracy demonstrations in 1992.⁵⁰ The resurgence of state violence since the 2006 coup is detrimental to the progress of parliamentary democracy as it works directly against electoral institutions. In the past, state violence had been prevalent during the military dictatorial regimes from the 1950s to 1970s, in which state agents illegitimately acted against political dissidents and enemies. During the mid 1980s, however, the practice of state violence had been gradually taken over by private killings among politicians and local bosses competing for control over the socio-economic resources within a given territory, and for the MP positions. Candidates' use of violence was aimed at winning elections, not disrupting or destroying the electoral process. It was violence in the realm of electoral competition, and respectful to electoral democracy.

When state violence was revitalized after the 2006 coup, it was not directed against individuals as was the case in the past; rather, it was targeted against political forces and institutions that underpin electoral democracy. If from 1979 to 2005 electoral violence stemmed from the vulnerability of political bosses, the post 2006 coup violence stemmed from the vulnerability of traditional elites and the erosion of their power. Unelected elites resorted to violence to reconsolidate their power and undermine their opposition. First of all, the 2006 coup overthrew the popularly elected government and prevented an election.

Second, the military-backed Abhisit government (2009-2011) used violence to suppress the electorate's political demands and to derail the electoral process.

Before resorting to violence, Thaksin's opponents had tried legal avenues to undermine Thaksin's political networks. On 30 May 2007, the Constitution Court delivered a ruling dissolving the Thai Rak Thai Party and banning 111 executive party members from any involvement in political affairs for five years. The judges found some TRT party executives guilty of violating the electoral laws in the April 2006 election.⁵¹ The TRT members created a new party called Palang Prachachon (People's Power Party- PPP) led by veteran politician Samak Sundaravej to stand in the 2007 election. Running on a populist policy platform and Thaksin's popularity, the PPP was victorious and formed a coalition government. However, on 9 September 2008, the Constitutional Court delivered a controversial decision disqualifying Samak from the premiership.⁵² The majority of the PPP and the coalition parties then voted for Somchai Wongsawat, Deputy Prime Minister and the brother-in-law of Thaksin to be the new premier. Somchai stayed in power for only three months and was forced to step down in the middle of the Yellow Shirt's airport occupation, after the Constitutional Court passed a ruling dissolving the PPP on charges of electoral misconduct.⁵³ Immediately after Somchai stepped down, military leaders forced some of Thaksin's allies to switch sides and vote for Abhisit.⁵⁴

In the end, these various legal measures failed to undermine Thaksin and his network of support, as the Red Shirt movement emerged to support Thaksin's allied parties and oppose the junta-backed government. The Red Shirts were a cross-class political movement of elements of the electorate, frustrated at how their elected government had been toppled, their choice of political party dissolved, and their electoral rights deprived. In 2009 and 2010, hundreds of thousands came to Bangkok to ask for the dissolution of the House and a new election from Abhisit, whose rise to power they deemed illegitimate. The protesters wanted to go to the ballot to exercise their basic political rights; they were not pursuing armed struggle or calling for the overhaul of the political system. Viewed this way, Abhisit's deployment of tanks and troops (with the tacit support of traditional elites) to suppress the demonstrators had two implications: to silence the voice of urban and rural mass electorates and to delay the re-establishment of electoral democracy. Collusion between the civilian administration of Abhisit and the traditional elites departed from previous patterns of repression. The civilian government authorized and carried out the crackdown and the government was able to

maintain their power even after committing mass murders.⁵⁵ In the post-2006 coup era, the traditional elites and the Democrat Party had become indispensable political partners.⁵⁶

Post-coup killings were more spectacular and public, in stark contrast to the secretive (but simple) nature of electoral violence among politicians.⁵⁷ The new mode of violence included the use of heavy weapons; the deployment of snipers; drive-by shootings; the use of car bombs and rocket-propelled grenades. Electoral killings normally happened in the provincial or remote areas (even if the ultimate aim was seizing a slice of political power at the national level). The new type of killings happened in the capital city, not rural areas, as Bangkok was repeatedly the stage for violent clashes between the demonstrators and the state apparatus. While electoral violence is decentralized, state and street violence is centralized.

What made the latest episode of political violence more complex and worrying was the use of coercive force by social movements. Both the Yellow and Red Shirts rhetorically vowed their commitment to non-violent struggle, but some of their actual practices violated the principles of non-violence. One of the (notorious) novelties of both movements was the use of hired thugs and gangsters to take care of security. Many were retired or active uniformed men who had military training. These paramilitary units were also working as security guards for the movements and their top leaders. The mobilization style of both movements was provocative and confrontational. It was true that most of the Yellow and Red Shirt protesters were unarmed and committed to non-violent practices, but the presence of armed elements weakened the legitimacy of the movements and made them prone to militarism and violent clashes. The intensified extra-parliamentary conflict in the forms of violent interactions between the opposing movements and the state overwhelmed the country's political life and weakened parliamentary democratic processes.⁵⁸

The victims of political violence over the past few years have been mostly protesters, movement leaders, and government officials, not politicians. In fact, no single politician has died as a result of the recent chaos. This reflects the minor or diminishing roles of political bosses, political parties and parliament in the current crisis. They have disappeared from the scene, most of the time merely bystanders. Some politicians were directly involved in the conflict, but as members of the movement, not as MPs.⁵⁹ Political parties had an uncomfortable relationship with the mass movements (both the Yellow and the Red Shirts). There was some evidence of political parties tacitly supporting the movements by giving

them resources for mobilization, but most politicians tried to distance themselves from extra-parliamentary politics. There were also internal debates within the Pheu Thai and Democrat Party on how to establish an appropriate relationship with the movements.⁶⁰ After 2006, the Pheu Thai and the Democrat Party realized that the Red Shirt and the Yellow Shirt movements' political supports were key to their respective electoral victory, but they did not want the social movement to dominate the party's direction and decision making. Tension between parliamentarians and political movement leaders thus existed throughout this period. However, the tension manifested in varying degrees from one province to another, therefore having different effects on the provincial electoral competitions. In strong Yellow Shirt provinces, one could observe a strong alliance between the Yellow Shirts and the Democrats. The Red Shirt movement was strong in the north and northeast, therefore most Pheu Thai MPs attempted to establish a good relationship with them. Only a few provincial bosses, notably those who had established monopoly power in their territories, did not need the movement's support; still, even these bosses had to avoid a hostile relationship with activists who transformed themselves into political brokers. Any bosses who pitted themselves against the color-coded movement dominant in their respective bailiwicks faced a challenging task and risked being defeated at the election.

From 2006-2011, the two most formidable forces in Thai politics were the colored mass political movements and the army. Politicians and political parties, as explained above, had been marginalized in this era of street politics. The establishment had weakened the parliament and electoral democracy through army interference, judicial activism, and reactionary social movements. An unelected elite minority had asserted extra-constitutional power over the political system. With the frequent dissolution of political parties, the truncation of political space and the deprivation of voting rights, frustrated elements of the electorate had no other option but to engage in mass mobilization. Fundamentally, the eruption of street violence was a by-product of the royal-army alliance's interference in electoral politics. The violent clashes between social movements and the military forces were non-electoral violence that had led Thai society to an impasse and a continued cycle of violence. Nearly everyone felt unsafe in this political environment. To paraphrase Benedict Anderson, it was "violence without progress."

The struggle between the establishment and those aligned with ousted Prime Minister Thaksin has deeply transformed Thai politics. Overall, it has made political struggle more

ideological. Electoral competition is no longer dominated by particularistic campaigns, but is instead infused with ideological and programmatic debate. Voters have different political stances and ideas regarding democratic values. They consider issues of the rule of law, the constitution, judicial activism, court decisions and they question the legitimacy of the coup and royal-army political interference, military suppression, and the nature of Thaksin's rule. These differing values and ideas affect voting. Color-coded politics and ideological conflict at the national level overrides personal conflicts among political bosses/families at the local level. With this changing mode of conflict, the demand for assassinations during election campaigns has decreased (though not entirely disappeared) as killing one individual candidate or vote canvasser could not substantially alter election results. This is the background to the 2007 and 2011 elections, which, as noted above, involved less electoral violence.

In conclusion, from 1997-2006, two major national-level factors—the 1997 constitution and its newly designed electoral system and the rise of a strong populist party and Thaksin transformed local political structures and power balances. They unsettled the existing local political order. Thaksin's ambitious goal of monopolizing the political market raised the stakes of electoral competition, forcing provincial bosses to employ fierce tactics to defeat their competitors. Consequently, the demand for and supply of electoral violence increased, as witnessed in the 2001 and 2005 elections. After 2006, because of the coup, political settings at the national and local levels underwent another major change. The royal-military intervention in the electoral process combined with growing ideological politics stifled and marginalized provincial bosses, thereby decreased the demand for violence and brought the decline of electoral violence in the 2007 and 2011 elections.

Notes

¹ Prajak Kongkirati, "Bosses, Bullets, and Ballots: Electoral Violence and Democracy in Thailand 1975-2011," PhD dissertation, Australian National University, 2013: 173.

² For detail on the political reform movement and the 1997 constitution, see Michael Connors, "Framing the 'People's Constitution'," in *Reforming Thai Politics*, ed. Duncan McCargo (Copenhagen: NIAS; Richmond: Curzon, 2002), 37-56.

³ See Allen Hicken, “How Effective Are Institutional Reforms?” in *Elections for Sale: The Causes and Consequences of Vote Buying*, ed. Frederic Charles Schaffer (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2007), 145-160.

⁴ Hicken 2007: 154.

⁵ See constitutional drafters’ arguments and debates in Thawinwadi Burikun et al., *Database for Thailand’s Constitution Drafting Assembly Records: The 1997 Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand* (Bangkok: King Prajadhipok’s Institute and Asia Foundation, 1999) (in Thai). However, evidence from other countries shows that smaller districts might in fact facilitate vote-buying as the number of votes needed to win is fewer. Also a single-seat district is still basically a candidate-centered electoral system, generating strong incentives to cultivate personal support networks (Hicken 2007: 47-60). The elections of 2001 and 2005 demonstrated that these caveats had a certain merit.

⁶ The FPTP is widely considered the “simplest form of plurality/majority system... in which the winning candidate is simply the person who wins most votes” [Andrew Reynolds, Ben Reily, and Andrew Ellis (eds.), *Electoral System Design: The New Institutional IDEA Handbook* (Stockholm: International IDEA 2005): 35]. On discussion of electoral system choice and conflict, see Arend Lijphart, “Constitutional Design for Divided Societies,” *Journal of Democracy* 15, no. 2 (April 2004): 96-109.

⁷ In the 2001, 2005, and 2007 elections, the ECT focused entirely on vote buying and electoral fraud, and turned electoral security over to police. It was not until the 2011 election, after electoral violence had become a major concern and taken seriously by the ECT. Interview, two senior ETC officers, Bangkok, 8 June 2011; interview, senior police officer overseeing election security, 9 June 2011 and 25 July 2011.

⁸ The Phalang Tham Party was founded in 1988. Its major vote base was the urban middle classes in the capital. At its peak in the March 1992 elections, the party won 41 seats nationwide (32 of which were in Bangkok). But it managed to obtain only 1 seat in the 1996 election, and Thaksin resigned as party head when the voting was over.

⁹ Thane Chaiwat and Pasuk Phongpaichit, “Rents and Rent-Seeking in the Thaksin Era,” in *Thai Capital after the 1997 Crisis*, eds. Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker (Chiang Mai: Silksworm Books, 2008): 255-256.

¹⁰ Thani and Pasuk 2008: 257, 258. By comparison, the provincial-level businessmen had pursued a more risky path. A large number of provincial business entrepreneurs had had active involvement in electoral politics since the late 1970s, and, by the 1990s, some of them had direct control over political party (Banarn Silpa-archa was the best example).

¹¹ On studies of Thaksin’s and the Thai Rak Thai party’s political successes and pitfalls, see Kasian Tejapira, “Toppling Thaksin,” *New Left Review* 39 (May-June 2006): 5-37; Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thaksin: The Business of Politics in Thailand* (Chiang Mai: Silksworm Books, 2004).

¹² Narong controlled large numbers of MPs in the North, while Sanoh controlled the central and northeast. Both factions combined had more than one hundred MPs.

¹³ In the 2001 and 2005 elections, several of TRT’s less influential candidates were able to defeat powerful bosses because of the party-policy package.

¹⁴ Also, the constitution stipulated that the 2001 election was the last in which politicians were allowed to be a party member for less than 90 days before the election. A large number of politicians took advantage of this regulation. After this election, the 90-day party membership rule would be enforced, greatly benefiting Thaksin’s party.

¹⁵ In the 2001 election, the TRT won 248 out of 500 seats (48 party-list and 200 constituency seats) so Thaksin needed to invite other parties to form coalition government. In the 2005 election, he aimed to win an absolute majority, eventually succeeding as the TRT won 377

out of 500 seats (75 percent). They thus became being the first party in Thai history to establish single-party government.

¹⁶ Between February and May 2003, the Thaksin government launched a countrywide campaign against drug dealers. Within four months, 2,598 alleged drug offenders were shot dead in apparent extrajudicial killings; many of those killed were on “blacklists” prepared by police and local government agencies, who used these lists to settle personal disputes and score political points. See Human Rights Watch, *Human Right Watch World Report 2007: Events of 2006* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2007): 329-334.

¹⁷ Thaksin delivered this speech on 20 May 2003 at the Royal Police Club, Bangkok, to a group of provincial governors, police chief, and high-ranking officials. See the full speech in Department of Provincial Administration, *Suppression of Influential People: A Volume of Related Official Documents* (Bangkok: Asaraksadindaen, 2003): 3-8 (in Thai).

¹⁸ Department of Provincial Administration 2003: 4, 7.

¹⁹ Quotation came from Department of Provincial Administration 2003: 4, 6; and *Daily News*, 14 December 2003: 1, 2 (respectively).

²⁰ According to the survey conducted by the National Statistics Office in 2003 and 2005, More than 86.5% of respondents were satisfied with the government’s campaign to suppress influential figures. See National Statistics Office, *Public Opinion Surveys on the Suppression of Influential People* (Bangkok: National Statistics Office, 2005): 15 (in Thai).

²¹ See more details in “guidelines for the suppression of influential people” Department of Provincial Administration 2003: 27-28, 31.

²² Journalists reported powerful bosses in some provinces paid 10 million baht to high-ranking officials. The Interior Ministry did not confirm but neither denied the possibility of the bribe as well (*Krungthep Thurakit*, 12 June 2003: 9, 16).

²³ Provinces with the highest number of influential people were Kanchanaburi, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Mukdahan, Trang, and Chiang Rai (respectively). Out of 813 figures, most of them were connected to illegal gambling, drugs trafficking, hired guns, and natural resource exploitation. See the complete list in *Matichon*, 10 June 2003: 1, 12.

²⁴ *Matichon*, 3 July 2003: 1, 16.

²⁵ Eventually, his government demoted and transferred some provincial governors and police chiefs out of their areas. In Phang Nga province, a Democrat Party stronghold, both the governor and the police chief were transferred as they came up with only two names of provincial bosses (*Thai Rath*, 10 July 2003: 1, 16, 19).

²⁶ The number of influential people increased in every province. For example, in Phrae, it rose from zero to 50, and in Buriram it rose from 14 to 45 (*Matichon*, 24 June 2003: 1, 15).

²⁷ I translated “troops” from Thai word “kongkamlang” and “tool” from “khrueangmue.” Both words were used emphatically in the commission’s document. See the commission’s strategies in Department of Provincial Administration 2003: 24-25.

²⁸ See Chitti et al., *A Report on Lottery* (Bangkok: Faculty of Social Administration, Thammasat University 2007) (in Thai).

²⁹ This conventional wisdom was widely shared among political pundits, journalists, NGO activists, public intellectuals and academics. See *Nation Sudsapda* (2-8 June 2003): 16.

³⁰ In Phang Nga, the leading Democrat’s brother was named an “influential” figure. The Democrats said there were political motives behind the list to discredit their party member. They also claimed the TRT contacted many politicians in Phang Nga to run for the TRT in exchange for their names being removed from the blacklist. (*Matichon*, 9 July 2003: 1, 15).

³¹ Banharn and other Chart Thai’s Suphanburi MPs were furious at the attack. One Chart Thai MP said he agreed with government policy but disapproved of the way the government used this campaign to destroy its political opponents. (*Thai Rath*, 1 October 2003: 1, 19).

³² In Phrae, the Democrats gained one seat, while the TRT won two. In Kanchanaburi, the Democrats won three seats, left two seats for the TRT. See Election Commission of Thailand (ECT), *Statistics and Election Results of the 2001 General Elections* (Bangkok: ECT, 2001).

³³ *Daily Manager*, 3 July 2003: 15.

³⁴ From 2001 to 2003, at least six local politicians were shot dead in Kanchanaburi (*Dokbia Thurakit*, 4 July 2003: 1, 11).

³⁵ *Khao Sod*, 29 January 2004.

³⁶ *Khao Sod*, 21 October 2005. Later in 2007, however, he and his wife were acquitted by the Appeal Court (*Manager*, 25 September 2007).

³⁷ *Khao Sod*, 29 December 2003. There was wide speculation that the murders of the two most powerful bosses in Saraburi and Samutsongkram stemmed from an “official” order as two of them were on the government blacklist. The rumors of the blacklist made many provincial bosses keep a low-profile.

³⁸ The most remarkable case was *kamnan* Poh of the Chart Thai Party. *Kamnan* Poh, or Somchai Khunpluem, perhaps then the most famous godfather of Thailand, had allegedly been involved in many murder cases in Chonburi but had never been prosecuted. Various political parties and candidates had sought his political support, including the TRT, but he chose to support the Chart Thai Party after the 1995 election and swept all seats in Chonburi for Chart Thai in almost every election, including in 2001 when his team won 6 seats and left only 1 seat for the TRT. During the war on influential people, police charged him with masterminding the murder of a local businessman, and for corruption in the purchase of public land. These charges clearly prompted *kamnan* Poh and his family to move to the TRT and helped TRT grab all seven seats in the 2005 election (“Rocking *kamnan* Poh, shaking Chonburi political base,” *Prachakhom Thongthin*, 3: 26 (April 2003): 18-20, 124; “Court seizes *kamnan* Poh’s B15m bail,” *Bangkok Post*, 29 November 2011).

³⁹ *Krungthep Thurakit*, 8 July 2003: 13-16.

⁴⁰ Nakhon Pathom and Chiang Rai were two primary cases (*Matichon*, 10 July 2003: 1, 15).

⁴¹ The policy campaign also continued after the 2005 election, but its focus had shifted to urban mafias, notably in Bangkok, rather than rural godfathers (*Siam Thurakit*, 6 April 2005: 10; “Mafia businesses on street,” *Thai Rath*, 18 April 2005: 1, 5).

⁴² In January 2006 Thaksin’s family sold its shares in [Shin Corporation](#), a big telecommunication company, to Temasek Holdings of Singapore for US\$1.88 billion. His family gained an enormous profit from this deal and paid no tax, which is legal under Thai law. The “tax evasion” issue, however, sparked a series of angry demonstrations in Bangkok.

⁴³ However, the real reason for the boycott was opposition parties’ belief that they were going to lose to the TRT again. “[Opposition to boycott election](#),” *Bangkok Post*, 26 February 2006.

⁴⁴ <http://nationmultimedia.com/breakingnews/read.php?newsid=30000759>

⁴⁵ See the king’s full speeches in *Matichon*, 26 April 2006; *Krungthep Thurakit*, 26 April 2006.

⁴⁶ The Constitutional Court based its ruling on a technical problem with the voting process, saying that the position of vote booths violated voter’s privacy (*Matichon*, 8 May 2006).

⁴⁷ The definition is drawn from Sisk 2008, 5-6, emphasis added; see also Fischer 2002.

⁴⁸ Previous coups were either conducted to settle conflict among rival factions within the army or to unseat the government from the administration. None of them directly interfered with the electoral process.

⁴⁹ For accounts of violent confrontation, clashes, and crackdowns occurring post-coup, see International Crisis Group, *Bridging Thailand’s Deep Divide*, Asia Report N 192, 5 July 2010; Nick Nostitz, *Red VS. Yellow* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2009); Wassana Nanuam, *Secret, Deceit, and Bloodletting* (Bangkok: Matichon, 2011) (in Thai).

⁵⁰ Based on official records, there were 77 people killed in 1973, 43 in 1976 and 44 in 1992. The actual death tolls of these incidents are, however, believed to be much higher. For the protest from 12 March to 19 May 2010, official figures put the death toll at 89 people and about 1,800 others injured. However, the death toll collected by the independent group of academics and NGOs, People's Information Center, is 94 people. See People's Information Center (PIC), *Truth for Justice: the April-May 2010 Crackdown* (Bangkok: PIC, 2012) (in Thai).

⁵¹ The court ruled that TRT's leading members hired certain small parties to run in the April 2006 election to make the election appear competitive and legitimate (*Thai Rath*, 31 May 2007: 1).

⁵² According to the court ruling, Samak, by performing in a TV cooking show while he was prime minister, acted in breach of Section 267 of the 2007 constitution "prohibiting the Prime Minister and Ministers from having any position in a partnership, a company or an organization carrying out business with a view to sharing profits or incomes or being an employee of any person" (see the 2007 constitution). The court ruling led to public debate and wide criticism (*Matichon*, 9 September 2008: 1).

⁵³ Like its predecessor the TRT, all 109 executive members of the PPP were banned from politics for five years. Besides the PPP, the Constitutional Court also dissolved the two other parties, including the Chart Thai Party of Banharn Silpa-archa (*Thai Rath*, 2 December 2007: 1, 16).

⁵⁴ See details in Wassana 2010: 58-62, 142-148, 449-454.

⁵⁵ In 1973 and 1992, the crackdowns were carried out by the military-dominated government. Military prime ministers in both events had to step down from power after the bloodshed. The 1976 massacre was undertaken by an army faction (with the support of right-wing forces) and constituted a pretext for the army to topple the then civilian government.

⁵⁶ As mentioned above, the establishment of the Abhisit government was itself made possible by the intervention and manipulation of the royal-military-bureaucratic alliance.

⁵⁷ Thailand's electoral murders are usually perpetrated by a two gunmen hit team.

⁵⁸ Lessons from the tumultuous period of the Thai democratic experiment from 1973 to 1976 show us that in the context of a weak and ineffective semi-democratic state, a violently polarized and confrontational civil society can destabilize or even undermine parliamentary democracy. See the argument in Prajak Kongkirati, "Counter-movements in Democratic Transition: Thai Right-Wing Movements after the 1973 Popular Uprising," *Asian Review* 19 (2008).

⁵⁹ The key examples were Somkiat Pongpaiboon of the Democrat Party, leader of the Yellow Shirts, and Jatuporn Phromphan of Pheu Thai Party, the Red Shirt leader.

⁶⁰ Interview, Pheu Thai MPs and the Democrat Party's MPs, Bangkok, July and September 2010.