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and Democratisation: The 1992 Bangkok  
Uprising Revisited**

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# NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS AND DEMOCRATISATION: THE 1992 BANGKOK UPRISING REVISITED<sup>1</sup>

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Ten years have lapsed since the 1992 Bangkok uprising. In the intervening period, the heroism and sacrifices of the people who took to the street to demonstrate against military dictatorship may have faded somewhat from public memory. The social impacts from the massive demonstrations, however, are still reverberating. The popular outrage against the 1991 constitution, which allowed General Suchinda Kraprayoon, the leader of the February 1991 coup, to bypass the electoral process and assume the premiership, is one example. This outrage was a key force behind the constitutional campaign, which eventually crystallised in the promulgation of the 1997 'people's constitution'. The causes of the 1997 financial crises may also be traced to the financial deregulation measures taken, without the usual democratic oversight, by the military-appointed Anand Panyarachun government of the time. Finally, and most importantly, the 1992 uprising was a severe blow to the tradition of military intervention in civilian politics. It helped to entrench consensus as the base of legitimacy in political structure.<sup>2</sup> Economic and political crises such as those during 1997-98 were conspicuous for the silence of those in uniform.

This paper is primarily intended to be a review of the events that led to the 1992 uprising, and the events of the uprising itself. My goal is to refute the still dominant view that interprets the uprising as a middle class-based revolt, led and co-ordinated by Thailand's non-governmental organisations (or NGDOs).<sup>3</sup> Conflating this with similar tendencies in other parts of the region, this view of NGOs is expanded to substantiate the claim that they herald the arrival of an era of middle class-based democratic politics in Asia. This phenomenon is approached from different angles. Pluralists such as Gerard Clarke (1998) attempt to confine NGOs in the political realm of advancing the 'associational revolution'. Under this formulation, NGOs foster the proliferation of autonomous associations within the civil society. The expansion of the latter eventually collides with, and overpowers, the authoritarian state in a process of democratisation (see Anek, 1993). Theorists with postmodernist tendencies,

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Kevin Hewison for his comments on this paper.

<sup>2</sup> According to Habermas (1989: 28), the rule of an ideal democratic system is based on popular consensus reached through reasoned debate in the public sphere.

<sup>3</sup> The term NGDOs refers to the group of NGOs committed, in their development works with the rural and urban poor, to use a strategy of mobilisation to change the unequal social relations (see Surichai, 1985).

such as Callahan (1995), analyse NGOs politics from the lens of identity formation. The proliferation of a diversity of NGOs devoting themselves to feminist, environmental, human rights and other clauses is viewed as sufficient by itself in challenging and undermining the cultural and moral foundation of authoritarian power.

Both positions are inadequate. Neither offers a holistic understanding of the politics of NGDOs in Thailand's democratisation. Pluralism is little more than a celebration of capitalism, which mystifies the contradictions and appropriations that are properly the inspirations that constantly propel the NGDOs in alliance with the unprivileged to demand accountability from the elites. Postmodernism detaches identity from the moorings of social relations, and shifts it to the realm of subjectivity and personal choice. As a result, identity is depoliticised and removed from social commentary, because it has become a matter of taste and personal liking. Such politics of difference, again, give rise to the familiar form of pluralism, where groups are encouraged to pursue divergent interests in political arena, and where the capitalist structure is rendered invisible and, indeed, is removed a legitimate concept of investigation. Postmodernism finds fault with Marxism for its determinist tendencies, which, as it is alleged, deprive social actors the autonomy. Granted that structural determinism is unacceptable, this does not warrant the conclusion that human behaviour has to be explained by political and cultural factors alone. Between structuralism and relativism is an intermediate zone that allows the analysis of concrete historically specific conditions by combining structural constraint and political-cultural autonomy.

This paper is an attempt to analyse the 1992 uprising by sensitively revealing both the structural context and the autonomous practices of the NGDOs. Specifically, in the first part, I am going to argue that the origins of the 1992 uprising have to be found in the contradictions of Thailand's capitalism, intensified since the early 1980s by various measures to liberalise and globalise the economy. Secondly, and as a result of the previous point, the 1992 uprising was extensively participated by workers and peasants, who demonstrated side by side with their middle class counterparts in Bangkok and in provincial centres. NGDOs facilitated the formation of a temporarily coalition between the unprivileged and the middle classes. The level of their mobilisation power correlated with their ability to bring the critique of the rural and urban poor into the public sphere and to force the middle class to face up to the falsehood between the authoritarian reality and their avowed commitment on equality, justice and democracy. This critique became a powerful mobilising tool prompting the middle class into streets to narrow the gap between ideals and realities.

### **The Structural Causes of the Bangkok Uprising**

The 1992 Bangkok Uprising was a social revolt against the military's domination of politics following the February 1991 coup. The emergence of these social forces has to be traced to the socio-economic changes during the

previous two decades. A convenient starting point to analyse these changes is the 1973 student uprising, which toppled the dictatorial regime of Thanom-Praphat-Narong, and gave rise to a brief period of great democracy. Even though the democratic interlude was violently terminated by the 1976 massacre at Thammasat University, the intense mobilisation and massive participation of peasants, workers, students and the middle classes during three short years has fundamentally transformed the political landscape (see Morell and Chai-Anan, 1981, Girling, 1981, Anderson, 1977, and Turton, Fast and Caldwell 1978). The military took back full control of government a year after the October 1976 coup. It was forced, however, to recognise that oppressive rule was counterproductive because it fuelled the communist insurgency, and worsened the investment climate. Under this situation, the ruling military elite had to make some concessions to democratic demands. The democratic system that subsequently emerged Suthy (1985: 50) called a 'para-democracy'. In essence, this was a power sharing arrangement between the military elite and the bourgeoisie, albeit masked by a formal electoral process.

This para-democratic system, according to Suthy (1985), is a compromise to contain the contradictions of the accumulation regime. In the past, social discontent, generated by the gross inequitable development, was suppressed by highly repressive military rule. However, the 1973 student uprising and the subsequent politicisation of the lower classes demonstrated that militarism had outlived its usefulness. Overt military rule and repression served only to radicalise opposition, and caused undue political instability. The military was forced to find a political structure – para-democracy – that could preserve their domination, while catering to increasing demands for openness and accountability.

The key to the smooth functioning of the para-democratic regime was the co-operation of the bourgeoisie – both the rural provincial elite, dominated by *jao phor*<sup>4</sup>, and the urban conglomerates. The former delivered the necessary votes and electoral victory to prevent the elections from turning into a weapon to challenge elite domination. Once secured in their parliamentary seats, they repeatedly transferred the 'electoral mandate' to the military who selected its leader, Prem Tinsulanond, to assume the post of premier.<sup>5</sup> Prem played an important role in reviving the depressed economy and thus deprived politically ambitious military officers of a frequently used excuse for intervention, namely economic mismanagement. In the new situation, interventions such as coups might provoke a social revolt to destroy the para-democracy. These two points and their potential implications will be elaborated below.

The emergence of para-democracy coincided with a period of accumulation crisis for the import substitution growth strategy, resulting in the piling up of

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<sup>4</sup> A term used to describe locally-influential businessmen-cum-godfathers.

<sup>5</sup> The military controlled the unelected Senate as well.

government external debt to an unsustainable level.<sup>6</sup> The debt crisis forced the political elite to accept a World Bank-IMF structural adjustment programme in the early 1980s. Trade liberalisation and export-oriented industrialisation measures, prescribed under the program, failed to break up the rent-seeking regime. Languishing under the years of government-imposed economic austerity to maintain international solvency, Bangkok-based conglomerate capital eventually pushed Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanond (1980-88), through the Joint Private Public Consultative Committee, to accelerate reforms. It demanded currency devaluation, tariff reforms, and other important changes in the macro-economic environment. In spite of opposition from some elements within the military, Prem managed to take the first concrete step of liberalisation by devaluating the Baht in 1984 (Anek, 1992).

It is doubtful that without the concomitant global economic restructuring initiated by the US-Japan Plaza Accord, domestic reforms alone could have produced the level of economic growth enjoyed by Thailand since the second half of the 1980s (Hersh, 1998). Notwithstanding this, conglomerate capital presented itself as the sector responsible for promoting a strategy leading to an era of unprecedented economic growth and prosperity. Economic success thus helped the largely Sino-Thai conglomerates to articulate a bourgeois ideology that had two important components. Firstly, they claimed a link between private entrepreneurial skills and economic prosperity. This was used to prove that the ethnic Chinese bourgeoisie had behaved like a 'national' bourgeoisie by bringing prosperity to all. Secondly, to the extent that the above point was accepted, conglomerate capital demanded access to political power, and display a degree of independence from the military. Its source of legitimacy was based on its claim to knowledge and skills in running the modern economy, and by extension, managing politics, efficiently and rationally without the corruption and abuse of power typical of an authoritarian military regime. In the short term, economic growth stabilised the para-democratic regime. In the longer term, it strengthened the independence of the bourgeoisie, and might potentially upset the power balance within the ruling coalition.

The other key partners in para-democracy were province-based *jao phor*, who

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<sup>6</sup> The proximate causes of the debt crisis could be traced to the second oil crisis. However, the crisis had deeper roots in the domestic political economy and in Thailand's dependence on the world capitalist system. After the early 1960s, Thailand had adopted the ISI strategy that turned it into a country dependent on the import of capital, technology and component parts, and on the export of its agricultural produce to pay for those imports. Demand fluctuations in the world market for these commodity exports and the resulting deteriorating terms of trade were the structural sources of the debt crisis. In the 1970s, when petrodollars glutted the financial market and fuelled a credit boom, Thailand's government obtained cheap external loans to keep the ISI economy afloat. When the US raised interest rates in the early 1980s, this caused a worldwide hike. Thailand's debt service ratio shot up overnight and plunged its economy into a debt crisis (Muscat, 1994: 158; Suthy, 1985: 14; Pasuk and Baker, 1995: 147). Aggravating the crisis was the decline of the rural sector. Agriculture had been the engine of Thailand's postwar economic growth. However, it had also suffered from years of squeeze and neglect by the Bangkok regime, stagnated, and was unable to perform its traditional role of extracting the economy from crisis (Prasert, 1987: 342).

were able to accumulate huge wealth by engaging in both legal and illegal businesses, and to exert considerable influence by securing the co-operation of bureaucrats, military and police officers in local, and eventually, national politics (Pasuk and Sungsidh, 1994: 52-53; Ockey, 1993). Through the selective meting out of patronage backed up by threats of violence, they managed to sway voting behaviour of people living in their territories. By the mid-1980s, vote buying permeated the election system and influenced the highest level of state power. It was almost impossible to get elected to parliament, with the partial exceptions of Bangkok and the South, without vote buying. National politics was dictated by the necessity for members of parliaments (MPs) to recoup the money 'invested' in the previous election, and to accumulate resources and to extend the vote buying network for the coming one. Their primary goal was to get into the cabinet. Cabinet was the ultimate source of control of public resources in a highly centralised political system. Inter- and intra-party conflicts over the distribution of power and spoils, and the public outcry caused by intermittent exposures of these abuses and scandals, often leaked by aggrieved parties who felt unfairly treated, appeared to become the only dynamics in this political system.

Despite their apparent control of political power, these civilian politicians willingly served under, and turned themselves into proxies, of military rule, manifested in the repeated transference of the electoral mandate to army strongman Prem by inviting him to head the government. This was because, in the process of capital accumulation, they required the security, stability and social control provided by the military against communist insurgency and opposition from students, workers and peasants. Meanwhile, a corrupt and 'imperfect' system gave the military an excuse to maintain a role in the political system in the name of protecting people's interests.

The entrenchment of vote buying, corruption and military domination appeared to have led Thailand's democratisation into an impasse. However, beneath this paralysis was the opening up of more space for NGOs and democratic groups to organise at the grassroots level, symbolised by massive public pressure generated against the construction of the Nam Choan Dam in 1987 (Hirsch, 1993). A year later, the social pressure for an 'elected' prime minister appeared to be a critical factor in discouraging Prem to accept another term of office, and in transferring the rule to Chatichai Choonhavan, whose Chat Thai party won the largest number of seats in parliament in the 1988 election. The change in leadership gave the business politicians more reasons to celebrate themselves as elected representatives of the people. Riding on this wave of popular activism, they entrenched their rule by preying on the mutual fears of the military and the social opposition. They warned the military not to stage a coup for fear of a popular revolt, while they placated its hurt esteem by allowing it to preserve some of its privileges. They told the people to entrust democracy to them but warned them not to make excessive demands for fear of provoking the military into snuffing out the young democracy. In the meanwhile, the Chatichai regime has done very little to clean up corruption, money politics, and

party infighting.<sup>7</sup> Thus, while the Chatichai government hailed itself as the symbol of the new 'full democracy' in Thailand, it was in reality a mere continuation of para-democracy under the leadership of the business-politician.

The change in political leader, however, should not be underestimated. The significance of Chatichai taking the helm of power lies in his government's potential for transcending the para-democracy. His ascendancy demonstrated the possibility of an alternative source of legitimacy beyond relying on military power. Using their financial and social influence to control elections, and manipulating the various streams of social mobilisations within the middle classes and amongst the urban and rural poor, business politicians started to realise that they could call the political shots. The attempt to construct this new form of legitimacy, as I will argue below, is one of the primary causes of the 1991 coup.

The period of para-democracy coincided with the rise of the NGDO's power to mobilise in rural areas. This power emerged in parallel with heightened social conflicts in the countryside. Economic penetration in rural areas was intensified since the Bangkok regime committed itself to push Thailand into 'NIC-dom' through the promotion of export-oriented industries, tourism and agro-industrial exports. The latter two had a particularly severe impact on the rural sector. The building of golf courses, hotels and resorts fuelled land speculation and eviction. In co-operation with multinational capital and the military and government, agribusinesses such as eucalyptus plantations in the Northeast, tiger prawn farming in the South, and various kinds of contract farming in the North and the Central regions, either took land from the peasants, destroyed the forest and surrounding environment, or effectively turned the peasants into bonded labourers toiling for big businesses on their own land. Resource conflicts expanded. Encountering this wave of grassroots mobilisation, NGDOs had to find ways to respond if they wanted to remain relevant.

Thai NGDOs attained a remarkable understanding of the nature of the relationship between themselves and the people's organisations. They were keenly aware that they were from the middle class and they could not simply supplant the mass organisations of the urban and rural poor. They could only be, to use a catch phrase in the NGDOs movement, a 'catalytic agent' of people's empowerment. This entailed the painstaking building of confidence, consciousness and the organisational base of the exploited under-classes. NGDOs had to raise awareness of the dominating capitalist structure as the main cause of their exploitation. There were numerous debates amongst NGOs during this period. For example, there was a radical group that favoured a mobilising approach, who often clashed with those who adopted a less confrontational strategy, focusing on village-level development. The latter

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<sup>7</sup> Tamada (1991: 16)'s observation is most appropriate here. "It is unpleasant for those enjoying various privileges through the politics of *itthiphon* [influence] to endorse the further development of representative democracy or the realization of politics which can reflect the interests of the powerless masses who are unable to participate in politics of *itthiphon*."



approach emphasised the need for villagers to look for their strengths. These were located in tradition and culture. Opponents suggested that such a strategy was conservative, while its adherents argued that allowing villager to determine their aspirations was empowering, and embodied a critique of state-centred development strategies.

Both 'sides' of the debate agreed that the unprivileged were capable of understanding their predicaments and of leading struggles for their own salvation. The task for NGOs was to help condense this experience and critique into a theory, which addressed the cause of oppression and the actions leading to liberation. In the course of formulating this theory, the NGOs were themselves enlightened and humbled by the potentials of the unprivileged. Reflecting the general course of politics and rapid economic development, the more conservative approach prevailed. This practice was given systematic exposition in 'community culture' (*watthanatham chumchon*) theory (see Chatthip, 1991; Seri and Hewison, 1990). Through this theory, the NGOs seemed to have found an illuminating instrument to guide them in building of solidarity with the poor. The descent of the phase of globalisation and export-oriented capitalism in the second half of the 1980s gave them the opportunity to put their theory into practice.

The rapid intrusion of the market into every area of rural life stirred up a phase of social activism unseen since the mid 1970s. What was unique about this phase of rural mobilisation is that it coincided with a period of labour and middle class activism. State enterprise workers, the most organised sector of the trade union movement, fought against privatisation, and demonstrated in, for example, the Social Security Act campaign, in solidarity with the interests and movements of other workers and their solidarity groups.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, a not insignificant segment of the middle class has showed increased commitment to democratic reform.<sup>9</sup> Its emergence might be related to the contradictory position in which this class was situated in the present phase of capitalist development. On the one hand, its growth and expansion were closely tied up with capitalism. On the other hand, it was better able to understand the plight of the poor, partly because many of its constituents had only recently risen up from such conditions themselves, and partly because many of them were still in a precarious situation such that an economic downturn or personal misfortune might force them to slide back to their previous class position. In addition, the economy was comparatively freer from state control than its counterparts in other Southeast Asian countries. The political and economic costs of

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<sup>8</sup> The 1989 Social Security Act campaign witnessed the active participation of organised labour in alliance with students, NGOs and the urban poor demanding better social protection for the unprivileged. This act was passed into law despite the explicit opposition from the military (Reinecke, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> Elements of the middle class have not been a 'natural' supporters of democratisation. In the face of the communist threat of the late 1970s, this class was very conservative and supported repressive government. With the end of the communist insurgency and the arrival of para-democracy, some became reform-minded and vocal in demanding democracy and clean government.

confronting the state at this time were relatively mild. Consequently, the middle class had more freedom to be critical of corruption, inequality and injustice. The experience with democratic mobilisation in the 1970s also helped to etch in some elements of this class a sense of justice and democracy.<sup>10</sup> Many of them gave support to NGDOs in the 1980s. To observers like Keyes (1995: 178), NGDOs had forged an alliance between the poor and the middle class against the bureaucratic and military elite.

NGDOs and their partners managed to generate enough pressure for the government to terminate a number of dam projects, such as the highly symbolic Nam Choan, to impose a nationwide logging ban, to scale back some commercial eucalyptus plantation schemes, and to push through the Social Security Act. Amidst these successes, the nature and the limitations of this opposition have to be understood. Despite anti-capitalist rhetoric articulated in the community culture theory, this was not a revolutionary ideology. NGDOs essentially practiced reformism, which can be gauged from the following three points.

First, the failure of the Leninist Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) demonstrated to NGDOs that an elitist party tended to dominate the people, thus creating a worse evil than it was supposed to eliminate. This experience convinced many that they had to return to the immediate material concerns of the unprivileged by helping them to handle the so-called livelihood issues, such as defending them from being evicted by dam projects. NGDOs seemed to operate on a belief that consciousness and solidarity built through various livelihood campaigns could be naturally aggregated into a force for structural change. Without being firmly rooted in a class perspective, they tended to reduce capitalist conflicts in the countryside into simple issues of democracy and resource allocation. For instance, NGDOs criticised dams as a symbol of both inequality and authoritarianism. They argued that, through the construction of dams, the Bangkok elite plundered natural resources from the rural poor for the generation of electricity to feed the demands of urban-industrial interests. To the extent that the movement was successful, the immediate interests of the affected peasants was served. However, such campaigns did not help to promote class consciousness because it deflected key contradictions into urban-rural conflicts and into demands for democratic reform interpreted as allowing local people to have direct control over their natural resources. However, putting resources under local control carries no implication for the prevention of their capitalist exploitation. Thai rural communities are not immune from capitalist penetration, as the *jao phor* phenomenon illustrates.

Closely related to the above point is fact that NGDOs have demonstrated strong populist tendencies. Contained in their theory of community culture is the identification of the agency of transformation in the peasant community, which

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<sup>10</sup> The size of this conscientised segment caught the attention of observers such as Ruland and Bhansoon (1996: 32) who talked of a 'bifurcation' of the interests of the middle class; a segment playing the advocacy for the poor challenged the business-oriented segment. See also Suparb (1985: 102).

is romanticised as an equal, democratic and non-exploitative entity. Preserving these qualities is their primary concern because they are the source of solidarity in defending the community from capitalist intrusion (See also Hewison, 2000 and Connors, 2001). Unfortunately, this view inhibits a realistic analysis of class domination within traditional rural communities, and thus mystifies domination as generated exclusively from outside. As long as social transformation is conceptualised as a process of strengthening community solidarity against urban intrusion, the urban working class can never be a key agent in the project of transformation. It is, at best, a possible ally in the *rural* struggle. The building of an alliance between workers and peasants is not priority in this ideological framework. NGDOs have been criticised as being too focused on their rural constituents, and thus neglecting the urban working class (Ungpakorn, 1995). In response, NGDOs maintain that the rural poor is the most exploited sector in society, and thus deserve more of their attention. This explanation is not untrue, but my contention is that their rural orientation has deeper roots in their ideological structure.

Finally, the mobilisation strategy suitable for a movement that aims at immediate livelihood interests is not surprisingly the building of temporary alliances with other social groups on narrowly defined goals. This form of coalition-building strategy is justified by the need to generate maximum political pressure by bringing in as many groups and people in the coalition as possible. Hence, flexibility is more highly valued than ideological commitment in the process of coalition formation. However, this form of temporary coalition is inadequate to put up any serious challenge to the capitalist structure because there is no attempt to transcend the particular interests of various groups to a more encompassing consciousness of the nature of the capitalist system, and thus the means of its transformation. In fact, these latter issues are deliberately avoided because they are seen as divisive and harmful to popular support of the coalition. Any suggestion of forming the coalition based on a worker-peasant alliance is condemned as ideological and exclusionary. Without making intentional efforts to transcend temporary instrumental interests to class consciousness, these coalitions are not likely to be able to transform themselves into a counter-hegemonic historical bloc challenging both the structural and ideological foundations of capitalism (Boggs, 1984: 229).

In general, reformism manages to create some ripples on the margin without presenting any major threat to the capitalist system as a whole. It also easily lends itself to be co-opted by the ruling elite, who feels little pain in making some concessions to these groups to boost its democratic credibility. It may even see it fit to invite the coalition leaders to participate in various consultation panels, or assign them to some powerful positions. Claiming the need to represent the interests of the subaltern in the government, the leaders of these coalitions welcome the opportunities to join the government without appreciating the danger of co-optation.

By the end of the 1980s, the tendencies of co-optation were visible. Business politicians were willing to make a few concessions to the NGDOs. The NGDOs

celebrated these concessions as successes by claiming that they forced the ruling elite to accept 'people's politics'. The real beneficiary of this people's politics, however, were the business politicians who managed to ride on this wave of people's power to consolidate their position vis-à-vis the military. These concessions were a modest price to be paid in exchange for an image of responsiveness and accountability to people's demands.

The military elite, however, saw the reformist trend differently. It resented the fact that it was sidelined by the business politicians in major government decisions. It was particularly concerned that the political elite's flirtation with social forces would embolden the democracy movement and eventually jeopardise the military's political position by entrenching an alternative form of legitimacy based on the manufacture of popular consent. This fear appeared to materialise when Chatichai plotted to dismiss General Suchinda from the army commandship in early 1991. Chatichai's move would have been inconceivable if he did not believe that rising social forces had become a credible deterrent against a military coup.<sup>11</sup> Chatichai was a seasoned politician and the leader of a 'government party' known for its tendency to stay on the side of power, rather than for confronting it (Surin, 1992: 12). However, in face of this provocation, Suchinda staged a coup, believing that if he did not do it at that moment, it would be too late to turn the tide. From this perspective, the origin of the coup was not merely a conflict between the 'democratic' business politicians and the 'authoritarian' military elite, but was to be found in the wider reconfiguration of social forces.

However, to say that the generals did not realise that the political landscape was changing would be to underestimate their wisdom. This is indicated by the willingness of the military junta to go to great lengths in presenting the coup as an attempt to defend democracy against the abuse and domination of unscrupulous politicians. The military leadership obviously believed that popular dissatisfaction over political corruption gave them a chance to turn public opinion to their side. Hence, the enemies to be crushed after the coup, as it transpired, were not business politicians who were eagerly courted to join the Suchinda-led coalition government after the March 1992 election (see below). The real targets were the emerging oppositional social forces, in particular, the labour and farmers' groups. Many of the initial policies of the military junta were devised to suppress these groups and thus to make the para-democratic regime once again safe for the military. Scrutinising the nature of this coup is thus essential for the identification of the fault lines of the conflicts unfolding in the months ahead.

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<sup>11</sup> Since mid-1990, Chatichai's relation with Suchinda was rocked by a number of incidents, which fueled rumors on the imminence of a coup. See Ananya (1992), Murray (1991) and Tamada (1995). Chatichai's attempt to dismiss Suchinda could, then, be seen as a last ditch effort to avoid a military takeover. However, the fact that he allowed the relation to deteriorate to such a point was indicative of the new social environment.

## The Coup and Mobilisation

In their coup declaration, the junta were emphatic that they were saving democracy from unscrupulous politicians. According to them, corrupt business politicians had managed to sideline 'honest career government officials' and plunge the nation into a 'parliamentary dictatorship'. Being the only branch of government untouched by their influence, the military had a holy duty to intervene and save the nation.<sup>12</sup> In the days after the coup, the military promised to draft a new constitution within six months to close loopholes allowing corruption and vote buying to flourish, and to return the country to democracy soon after the constitution was adopted. During a news conference, Suchinda went so far as to say that the coup was 'one step back so we can take ten steps ahead'.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, the military junta tried to build its legitimacy by incorporating some of the strongest aspirations associated with the social activism of the late 1980s. However, this incorporation was selective. There was no mention of the rural poor, who were considered a traditional military constituency. Defending their interests had been used to justify past coups. In this case, however, the junta appeared to have moved towards the urban middle classes and conglomerate capital. The former's demand for clean government was made the rationale for the coup. One of the luminaries of the latter, Anand was appointed to lead the interim government. This appointment was intended not only to court large capital, but also to tap into the legitimacy it had managed to build up as efficient, independent, and entrepreneurial, and most importantly, as the group bringing about the unprecedented boom. All these measures tried to convey two messages. First, there would be no change in economic policy. In other words, the urban middle classes and the conglomerates would continue to enjoy economic prosperity. The military would not introduce economic nationalism and social measures to appease the poor.<sup>14</sup> Second, the military was able to find the most capable people to run the country, while the electoral system returned 'unqualified' cheats. Taking advantage of the authoritarian situation, the Anand government, in association with technocrats, pushed ahead with an ambitious program of economic liberalisation considered to have been blocked by rent-seeking interests.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The declaration was announced on Bangkok Army Television Channel 5 in Thai, 23 February 1991. Translated in FBIS-EAS-91-037: 43.

<sup>13</sup> Statement made by Suchinda during a news conference broadcast on Army Television Channel 5 in Thai, 24 February 1991. Translated in FBIS-EAS-91-037: 51.

<sup>14</sup> A populist economic program was promised, for instance, during the 1981 coup. See Chai-anan (1982).

<sup>15</sup> In the first nine months of his tenure, Anand managed to get the appointed provisional national assembly, which was dominated by military and conglomerate interests, to pass a total of 127 new laws, averaging one every two days. The major liberalisation measures were in four areas: the removal and reduction of state regulation over a range of production activities, the replacement of the business tax by a value added tax (VAT), the deregulation of the financial sector to raise competition within the banking sector and to facilitate the transformation of Thailand into a regional capital market, and the privatisation of state enterprises (see *Asian*

Not only had the coup leaders offered little to peasants and workers, they shortly delivered some crippling blows. In an attempt to destroy the labour movement, they deregistered the state enterprise unions, the most organised sector of Thai working class.<sup>16</sup> Thanong Pho-an, the outspoken President of the Labour Congress of Thailand, disappeared and was presumed murdered by the military (Somsak, 1993: 88-89). The fact that it was an independent-minded labour leader who was the first victim under the military regime exposed the nature of this coup. At the behest of multinational capital and agribusinesses, the military launched *Khor Jor Kor* (KJK), or the Land Redistribution Programme for the Poor Living in Degraded Forest Reserves. Initially disguised in the language of redistribution and reforestation, this was a massive eviction program, with tens of thousands scheduled to be forcefully expelled from their land and resettled in military controlled villages. The land would then be turned over to commercial eucalyptus plantation operators.<sup>17</sup>

KJK represented one step in a series of attempts by the ruling elite to restructure rural relations. The thrust was the intensification of commercialisation by making land available for more profitable uses. Many of these efforts had met with stiff opposition from the affected villagers and their NGDO allies. The proliferation of resistance in return convinced the military that they might lose control of the countryside if this trend was not halted. Thus, apart from the budget and power to control vast areas of land, the KJK offered the military a powerful weapon to discipline the estimated ten million people living in forest reserves, simply by threatening them with eviction. In this light, KJK was not only a joint military-bourgeois business venture, but also a systematic effort to reassert military domination in rural areas. KJK, not surprisingly, stirred up widespread rural discontents, and massive resistance.

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*Business*, October 1991: 30-39, *FEER*; 17 May 1990: 66; 18 July 1991: 45-8; 15 August 1991: 39; 29 August 1991: 34-5).

<sup>16</sup> The ban was devastating not just to the state enterprise workers, but also to the union movement in Thailand as a whole. In one stroke, nine of the ten largest unions in Thailand were deregistered. Nationally, total union membership halved from 338,000 to 152,000. The Thai Trade Union Congress (TTUC) – the largest labour federation – was the hardest hit. Its membership was reduced by more than three quarters, from 118,200 to 27,300, overnight. Half of its 40 executive members, including the president, the vice-president, the deputy secretary general, the treasurer, and the heads of the labour education and the women's departments, had to resign because they were no longer union members. The Labour Congress of Thailand (LCT) – the second largest federation – had its membership reduced from 68,200 to 27,700. Because these former SEU leaders lost their trade unionist status, they could no longer participate in tripartite bodies, such as the Central Labour Court and the National Council for Labour Development, in which they previously played a leading role (Sungsidh and Kanchada, 1994: 248).

<sup>17</sup> KJK called for the eviction of some 5.8 million people living in 9,700 villages scattered on more than 14.8 million rai of forestland over a period of five years. These families would be regrouped into villages in resettlement areas of 4.8 million rai, freeing the remaining 10 million rai for commercial plantation. The KJK was put under the control of the Internal Security Operation Command, and was headed by the deputy army chief, Major General Vimol Wattanavanit, with a mammoth 1,200 million baht budget (Pasuk and Baker, 1995: 83).

One month after the coup, NGDOs and the student movement reactivated an old network, known as the Campaign of Popular Democracy (CPD) to coordinate the anti-military movement. The reactivation of this old network was intended to send the message that every military intrusion in politics would be met with people's resistance. CPD emerged in both the 1978 and the 1982 constitution crises to counter the military threat to democracy. CPD tried to bring up the military's troubled past with democracy.

The CPD followed a two-pronged strategy in running their anti-military campaign. Firstly, it tried to hold the military accountable to its promises on corruption and promoting democracy. Secondly, it worked to broaden the anti-military movement by building an alliance between the unprivileged and the middle classes. On the one hand, it tried to link democracy with the livelihood of the common people by expanding the democracy movement beyond elections and political structures to issues such as KJK, the Pak Moon Dam<sup>18</sup> and the deregistration of labour unions. When the process of redrafting the constitution was started in April 1991, NGDOs sought to bring the often-perceived academic and distant constitutional issues closer to the daily life of the common people. The most important CPD initiative was to draft a 'people's version' of the constitution. People living in different parts of the country were encouraged to pool their collective wisdom in framing a constitution that could solve their everyday problems, protect their livelihoods and lead to an ideal society. In this way, the gulf between the livelihood issues ('the concrete') and the constitution ('the abstract') was bridged (Suthy, 1995: 124). Most importantly, it offered a public forum for local people to directly express their critiques and to take back democracy that was supposedly to give them control of political processes. Peasants took the opportunity to demand that their basic right to livelihood be protected in the constitution. Those threatened by the KJK were particularly active in various forums because they believed that the future of their struggle relied on the incorporation of their version of democratic ideals in the constitution (Niran, 1994: 56).

On the other hand, it tried to conscientise the middle class to the injustice the urban and rural poor had suffered under military rule. The People's Forum, hosted on October 1991 as a counter-conference to the joint annual meeting of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, was intended to serve this goal.<sup>19</sup> The meeting gave a forum for groups such as the Villagers Committee

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<sup>18</sup> The campaign against the Pak Moon Dam, located in the Northeastern province of Ubon Ratchathani, took place at almost the same time as the one against KJK. One month after the Chatichai government approved the dam in April 1989, affected villagers formed themselves into the Anti-Pak Moon Dam Committee to coordinate their activities. In March 1991, the military leaders disregarded a petition bearing 12,000 signatures protesting the project and decided to go ahead with the construction as scheduled to start on 15 May 1991. See Keyes (1995) and Murray (1992a).

<sup>19</sup> The NPKC saw the annual meeting as an opportunity to show the world that Thailand was prospering under the guidance of military leaders as before. The counter-meeting was determined to allow the grassroots to articulate ideas and critiques of economic liberalisation and military dictatorship. Five hundred villagers joined the meeting together with 400 people

for Forest Protection, Villagers Committee on Soil Salination, Love Moon River People's Group, and the like. Such groups were leading local resistance to KJK, the Pak Moon Dam and other threats to their rights and livelihoods. At the end of the meeting, a declaration on 'People-Centred Development' was proclaimed. Participants identified the roots of their problems in the skewed power structure that turned them into objects, or 'recipients' in the term of the declaration, of development. Development was synonymous with coercion and exploitation. Rural poverty and social inequality were the outcomes of the concentration of power at the top. 'Insofar as there exist within the ruling elite the so-called unusually rich, there are among the ordinary people those who are unusually poor' (see Suthy, 1992: 25). They demanded the decentralisation of power to the local communities so that local people could control the development process. People-centred development was thus a critique of the existing power structure in Thailand and a rallying call not just to clean up the malaises of the election system, but more importantly, to actualise democracy to the fullest extent by returning power to the people.

These efforts began to bear fruit in the second half of 1991. It should be noted that, initially, the middle classes in Bangkok greeted the coup with muted applause. Believing the military's promises, many saw the takeover as a 'new style coup' which advanced democracy by cleansing it of corruption and vote buying. The popularity of the junta reached its peak when Anand was appointed Prime Minister in late February, and the Asset Investigation Committee, set up to deal with the corruption of ex-ministers, identified in early March 1991, 25 'usually rich' and froze their assets. However, scepticism started to set in when rural discontents created a climate of unrest and when many politicians widely seen as corrupt were dropped from the 'unusually rich' list once they were clearly pro-military.<sup>20</sup> The anti-corruption saga became little more than a campaign of intimidation, meant to threaten politicians into submission under a new military-led ruling coalition. Demonstrating exceptional flexibility, business politicians repositioned themselves within the military-led alliance, and prepared to share power with their former 'enemy'. This new spirit of co-operation was founded on the need for the military to legitimise its control, and the ability of the business politicians to deliver such legitimacy by rigging future elections. This was no better demonstrated than by the behaviour of the Chat Thai Party. Despite the overthrow of its government by Suchinda, Chat Thai was as vociferous as the other parties in calling for the appointment of Suchinda to be the prime minister even before votes were cast in the March 1992 election.

The middle classes were equally disillusioned by the drafting process for the constitution. In November 1991, the military junta imposed four transitional clauses in the draft constitution, which, if implemented would essentially let the military preserve their domination through the control of the Senate, after the

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from Thai NGOs and 100 overseas delegates. The meeting is described in detail in *Thai Development Newsletter*, nos. 20 and 21. See also Yos (1992: 85-102).

<sup>20</sup> *The Nation*, 1 March 1992, FBIS-EAS-92-041: 65-6; Murray (1996: 65), *FEER*, 20 November 1991: 20.



return of parliamentary election.<sup>21</sup> The promise of strengthening democracy became a transparent hoax. The coup was exposed as no different from those in the past. It was basically a power grab by the military to perpetuate its domination. When a rally was called to oppose the draft constitution on 19 November 1991, the turn out was expected to be massive.

In an attempt to undermine the movement opposing the pro-military constitution, Suchinda and Air Force Commander Kaset Rojananin, the second most powerful figure in the junta, held a press conference the night before the rally. Suchinda declared that, should the constitution be passed in parliament, 'neither he [Kaset] nor I will take over as prime minister after the poll'. Questioned by reporters if there were any conditions attached to this promise, Suchinda replied, 'I have no conditions. My stand is that I won't run in an election and I won't play politics' (cited in *The Nation*, 19 November 1991, FBIS-EAS-91-223: 59). This declaration was intended to convince people that he had no political ambition, and thus remove one of the main motivations for people to join the rally.<sup>22</sup> Finally, at the insistence of the King, the constitution was passed, and a national election was scheduled to take place on March 1992.<sup>23</sup>

The constitution campaign, however, proved to be a skirmish in a much larger battle to be fought a few months later. Even though it did not achieve the key demand of an elected prime minister, its significance could not be underestimated. In the first place, it was a clear signal of the changed attitude of the Bangkok middle classes toward military rule. The disillusion originated from broken promises on cleansing corruption and promoting democracy. They had been betrayed. But more importantly, they agonised over the naivety that allowed them so easily to fall prey to such lies. The CPD and NGOs tried to turn their anger into action through scathing critiques of the constitution drafting process. At one level, these critiques were directed at the military leaders by holding them accountable for their promises. At another level, they were directed at the middle classes whose acquiescence with, if not applause of, military intervention facilitated NPKC rule. If they were so offended by Chatichai's corruption, which unwittingly turned them into silent accomplices of the coup, they should have been doubly offended by the military, which not only

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<sup>21</sup> Under these clauses, for the first four years, officials and military officers could take up political appointments without resigning from their other duties. Senators were to be nominated directly by the NPKC, and their number was to be raised to 360 – the same as that of MPs. They had similar powers to MPs, including the right to vote in no confidence motions. Candidacy for the premiership required the endorsement of at least 20 percent of the combined Senate and House members (see Murray, 1996).

<sup>22</sup> Despite the pledge, over 70,000 joined the rally – Thailand's largest demonstration since 1976 (Callahan, 1995: 104).

<sup>23</sup> During the birthday speech delivered on 4 December 1991, the King said, 'Any rule can be changed. There is nothing rigid. But avoid conflicts that could lead to bloodshed' (Murray, 1980: 80). His key message was that he wanted the constitution passed. Clearly, the King took the side of the military because, given military control in Senate and the domination of pro-military parties in the House, the chance of amending the constitution was remote, if not impossible.

had done little to clean up the corruption, but also led the country back to an authoritarian 'dark age'. To be true to their avowed democratic commitment, the middle classes had an unavoidable responsibility to correct the anomaly.<sup>24</sup> It was this context that made the critique against the undemocratic constitution such a powerful mobilisation tool. This awakening of the middle class made possible the creation of a broad-based coalition with the unprivileged against the military regime.

Secondly, the constitution campaign forced Suchinda to make another promise of not making use of the new constitution for his personal interests. As we will see, the breaking of this promise set off a more intensified round of mobilisation by both the middle and lower classes. Suchinda not only failed to consolidate the legitimacy of his rule; he helped to undermine it by blatantly breaking his promises so that he and his clique were seen as self-serving liars.

### **PollWatch and Election**

Between the promulgation of the constitution in December and the holding of the election in March, Thailand experienced another round of mobilisation. Anand insisted on forming an independent body, known subsequently as PollWatch, to monitor vote buying activities, and invited NGOs and other activists to lead the effort.<sup>25</sup> PollWatch liberally interpreted its mandate to include, for instance, the making of people's voices heard in the electoral campaign. A series of 'Forum for Democracy' was held at provincial centres and Bangkok. About 30,000 volunteers were mobilised and trained to keep the election 'clean'.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> For instance, activists such as Prinya Thewanarumitkul, chairperson of the Student Federation of Thailand, felt a responsibility to join the anti-military movement because their previous crusade for democratisation and clean government unwittingly played into the hands of the military by giving it an excuse to launch a takeover. They were enraged that their noble intention of fighting corruption was being used to end democracy. See Saeng-rawee (1992: 160).

<sup>25</sup> Anand's initiative probably originated from two related considerations. In the first place, the constitution contained no provisions to curb vote-buying as promised by the coup makers. Popular demands for these measures were strong at a time when the vote-buying practice in the March election was widely expected to be worse than ever because the 'unusually rich' were desperate to get re-elected. Secondly, Anand owed no favour to the *jao phor*, and functioned with some independence from the military regime during his term of office, as demonstrated for instance, contradicting the wish of the junta, in the re-negotiation of the 3-million-telephone-lines contract with the conglomerate, Charoen Popkhand (See Siroros and Haller, 1994: 322-328, and Kraiyudht, 1992). After the popular mobilisation against the pro-military constitution, he realised that a seriously discredited election process was not conducive to political stability. PollWatch helped give an impression that the government was trying to get this problem under control. The involvement of democracy groups in the PollWatch process might also add some legitimacy to the process and the constitution.

<sup>26</sup> PollWatch operated independently of the Ministry of Interior, and reported directly to the prime minister. However, it had no real power to take action on voting irregularities. Evidence of these activities had to be submitted to the government for investigation and prosecution. Gotham Ariya, one of the CPD leaders, was appointed its Secretary General. NGOs, and other groups with rural networks, such as students, teachers, lawyers, professors, and medical doctors, were

Not unexpectedly, vote buying was rampant in the March election.<sup>27</sup> The three top winning parties – Chat Thai, Sammaki Tham Party (the military dominated STP) and the New Aspiration Party (NAP, led by former military commander Chavalit) – were all heavily involved.<sup>28</sup> A toothless PollWatch had not made any significant impact (Murray, 1996: 97-98; Surin, 1992: 52-53; Arghiros, 1995: 44). However, the process had given people a platform to voice critiques in the public sphere and strengthened alliances between urban democracy activists and the rural opposition. The coordination of various NGOs and social groups in running the PollWatch campaign built and solidified the network among these groups. It proved to be a dress rehearsal for the nationwide anti-Suchinda mobilisation that took place two months later. Equally important, PollWatch managed to recruit a sizable group of volunteers and involved them in debating political issues and in observing local politics through monitoring the behaviour of candidates (Suthy, 1995: 131).

Many NGOs involved in PollWatch and the Forum for Democracy were motivated by a sense of urgency to try to use these means to improve the odds of the anti-KJK campaign's success. By March 1992, KJK had already evicted 20,000 people in 80 villages (*The Nation*, 7 March 1992). Eviction was expected to be accelerated after the new government formed. Peasants were not just enraged by the eviction itself; they were equally enraged by the brutal treatment meted out during the relocation process.<sup>29</sup> Many were determined to fight. Villagers organised themselves to write petition letters and to rally against the project. Some well-organised villages, such as those in the Kutbak District, Sakon Nakhon province, were able to resist the eviction throughout the lifespan of the project.<sup>30</sup>

The March election provided a source of hope that the return of democracy might give the anti-KJK campaign a better chance of success. However, it was

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mobilised for the poll. In total, 30,000 volunteers participated in the observation duties (*The Nation*, 9 January 1992, FBIS-EAS-92-007: 63; and Murray, 1996: 93).

<sup>27</sup> Gotham estimated that 50 percent of the votes cast involved an exchange of money. The percentage rose to 70-90 percent in the impoverished Northeast – *FEER*, 2 April 1992.

<sup>28</sup> The first post-election PollWatch report claimed that 32.4 percent of the alleged election offences involved Chat Thai members, 31.3 percent, STP members and 25.7 percent, NAP members. In other words, leading parties in both the ruling (Chat Thai and STP) and opposition (NAP) camps were heavily engaged in vote-buying (*The Nation*, 27 April 1992, FBIS-EAS-92-085: 36).

<sup>29</sup> The KJK was poorly planned, coercive, and insensitive to the needs of the peasants. They were uprooted, carted away and dumped into sites with minimal facilities – usually a small piece of empty land for their house with a rudimentary toilet in it. Many of them were asked to wait for the promised 15 rai of farmland. Others were allocated land that already had owners or was infertile, rocky and inadequate. The whole process showed little respect for the affected people, and was run in the style of a military exercise. The military turned the countryside into, literally, a 'battlefield', according to Pasuk, Sungsidh and Nualnoi (1996: 62). See also Murray (1992: 27-28) and Taylor (1993a: 8-9).

<sup>30</sup> The story of this resistance is recounted in Pasuk, Sungsidh and Nualnoi (1996: 51). See also *Bangkok Post*, 26 April 1992

dashed when Suchinda was appointed the prime minister on 7 April 1992. Many military officers involved with the project were promoted to more senior positions, and the new government was reported to be planning for an acceleration of the KJK project (*The Nation*, 24 April 1992).

The return to power of Suchinda after the March election destroyed not only the hope of the poor for an end to their plight, but also infuriated the urban middle classes. Shortly after the poll, the Narong Wongwan affair<sup>31</sup> was orchestrated to give General Sunthorn, chairperson of the junta, an excuse to insist that the coalition parties should drop Narong and nominate Suchinda to be the prime minister to end the crisis. Sunthorn said that there need not be concern about Suchinda's prior pledge of not taking the post. He claimed that the pledge was made merely to diffuse an extremely dangerous situation arising from the confrontation between the constitution campaign demonstrators and the NPKC (*The Nation*, 6 April 1992, FBIS-EAS-92-066: 64). In effect, Sunthorn confirmed that the promise was never made sincerely, and was a lie from the beginning. Then, on 7 April, the coalition parties invited Suchinda to lead the government. With the honourable excuse of saving the country from a power vacuum, Suchinda now self-righteously claimed that he had to sacrifice his personal credibility for the sake of national interest.<sup>32</sup>

To reciprocate business politicians' support, Suchinda shared power with them. On 17 April, the composition of his 48-person cabinet was announced. It included 11 of the 25 persons accused of being 'unusually rich'. Old style business politicians such as Montri Phongphanit, Samak Sundaravej, Narong Wongwan, Santi Chaiwiratana and Banharn Sinlapa-archa, were all appointed to ministerial positions (Murray, 1996: 125). Suchinda's cabinet was dominated by the same business politicians he had vowed to clean up after the coup.

By the time Suchinda formed his cabinet, the nature of the February 1991 military coup was obvious. It was basically a coup aimed at seizing power, and at shoring up the slacking domination of the military in the political system.

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<sup>31</sup> Narong Wongwan, the leader of the STP, was nominated by the pro-military parties to be the prime minister. Shortly afterward, it was disclosed that he was previously refused a visitor's visa by the US in an issue related to drug trafficking. Stirring up nationalist sentiment, Narong accused the US of meddling in Thai domestic politics. He mobilised his supporters to demonstrate in front of the US embassy, demanding evidence to support the accusation. Meanwhile, NPKC chairperson Sunthorn refused to submit Narong's name for royal endorsement, pending the clearing of Narong's name. The US embassy declined to make further statements on the issue. It was made to look like there was a political deadlock and Thailand was plunged into a political crisis.

<sup>32</sup> During one farewell speech, the tearful Suchinda told the audience of military officers, 'I had to go back on my word. But for the sake of the country, it might be necessary to break one's promise and swallow one's pride' (cited in *Bangkok Post*, 9 April 1992, FBIS-EAS-92-069: 47). One of the concessions made to the constitution campaign was the requirement that permanent officials resign from government duties before taking up political assignment, and hence, Suchinda's resignation from the military. Suchinda had a plan to keep his influence in the military, though. He appointed his brother-in-law, General Itsaraphong Noonphakdi, to succeed him.

While urban people were alienated by the arrogant behaviour of the coup leaders, the countryside was fuming over KJK, the Pak Moon Dam and other rural policies. Suchinda's assumption of the office of the prime minister thus became the lightning rod for a social revolt in May 1992.

### **The 1992 Uprising**

The uprising may be divided into three phases. The first phase (8 April – 3 May) was a gestation period centred on the hunger strike of Chalad Vorachat demanding Suchinda keep his promise to not take up the PM's position. The second period (4 – 16 May) started with Chamlong Srimuang joining the hunger strike. This galvanised the opposition, and days of massive demonstrations eventually forced the military-dominated coalition to agree on a constitutional amendment deal. Campaign leaders declared a temporary truce allowing the government a week to table the amendments in parliament. During this period, cleavages between Chamlong and CPD leaders emerged when Chamlong unilaterally took demonstrators to the streets. A day after the rally ended, the coalition parties backtracked. The Confederation of Democracy (CFD) was formed to take responsibility for resuming the demonstration on 17 May. The third phase (17 May – 24 May) began with a huge rally on the evening of 17 May. Soldiers opened fire in the early morning of 18<sup>th</sup>, and three days of bloodshed ensued. Rallies also began in the provinces. On 20 May, the King appeared on television demanding that Suchinda and Chamlong, seated on the floor before him, ended their conflict. Following the audience, Chamlong called on demonstrators to stop the 'chaos'. Four days later, Suchinda resigned the premiership after issuing a blanket amnesty to officers involved in the massacre.<sup>33</sup>

Not unlike other important historical events, the meanings of May uprising are subjected to various interpretations and appropriations. Its significance is either reduced to the deployment of a particular strategy (hunger-strike), the adoption of an organisation form (a non-hierarchical network), the charisma of a leader (Chamlong), the ascendancy of a particular class (the middle class), or the facilitation of 'modern' technology (mobile phone, fax machine). In the remainder of this paper, I will attempt to provide an alternative interpretation that addresses these issues, but also addresses the structural causes of the crisis, as identified in previous sections, but which have been given scant attention. I focus on the following themes: hunger strike and mass mobilisation, the discourses on democracy, leader and masses, middle class and technology and the anti-KJK campaign. My argument is that, detached from a structural context, the meanings and significance of various events of May 1992 have been obscured and mystified.

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<sup>33</sup> A chronology of the events is provided in Appendix A.

## Hunger Strike and Mass Mobilisation

The early period of the anti-Suchinda campaign centred on the hunger strike of two individuals – namely, the lesser known Chalard Vorachart, and the former Governor of Bangkok, Chamlong. On 8 April, immediately after Suchinda was appointed prime minister, Chalard started his hunger strike in front of the parliament building. He vowed to continue until Suchinda resigned from the premiership. Other spontaneous demonstrations also took place against Suchinda,<sup>34</sup> but Chalard's fast became the centre of the anti-Suchinda campaign. Every day, from five to nine o'clock in the evening, the site was crowded with as many as 2,000 people who joined in for a brief period of fasting to show their solidarity (Somsak, 1993: 96).

Chalard's hunger strike had a galvanising effect on the democratic struggle. However, the context making this strategy effective is often overlooked. Chalard had a reputation as a fighter for democracy. His two previous hunger strikes were also against military interference. On this occasion, Chalard's fast was actually offering a *critique* of middle class politics. His action said that if this class was genuinely committed to democracy and clean government, then it had to respond to the military's hijacking of the political process. It intended to force the middle classes to face up to their avowed commitment, and to take actions to rectify a grave mistake if they wanted to avoid any further complicity with the military clique.

Suchinda tried to marginalise Chalard's actions, and maintain that a democratically elected government should not be forced to resign by the suicidal threat of a 'professional hunger striker'. Suchinda went on to challenge Chalard's sincerity because, Chalard's previous fasts had not been to the death, as promised.<sup>35</sup> Suchinda's comment added to the perception of his insensitivity to social opposition.

While Chalard's fast mobilised thousands, this appeared inadequate in breaking the resolve of the military and the coalition parties. On 4 May, when the second major rally was called to coincide with Suchinda delivering a policy statement to the parliament, Chalard had fasted for more than three weeks. It seemed that if the rally could not generate the momentum to force Suchinda to

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<sup>34</sup> Immediately after Suchinda was sworn in as the prime minister, over 1,000 students demonstrated at Thammasat campus. Other student activists draped the Democracy Monument in black, mourning of the death of democracy. The SFT called on the opposition parties to immediately launch a censure motion against Suchinda (Murray, 1996: 131; *The Nation* 10 April 1992, FBIS-EAS-92-070: 48).

<sup>35</sup> Suchinda said, 'I don't think that person loves democracy. If you love democracy, you have to listen to the majority. He is making a big thing out of his own ideas, as if they must be right and proper, and it hasn't yet been the case that he has continued a hunger strike to the death. Captain Chalard has gone on hunger strike many times, and in the end has given up of his own accord' (cited in McCargo, 1997: 245). In Chalard's prior strikes, he did not end them for fear of his life. He ended his fast in 1983 because the constitutional amendments were defeated. During the 1979 oil price crisis, the role of Chalard's hunger strike was unclear, but the crisis contributed to the collapse of the Kriangsak regime – see Girling (1981).

resign, Chalard's strike would come to nothing. However, at the end of the rally, Chamlong surprised everybody by announcing that he would also begin a hunger strike. He vowed that he would fast to death unless Suchinda resigned. Chamlong's fast was widely seen as a move to breathe new life into the anti-Suchinda campaign. If a political lightweight like Chalard could generate great sympathy, then one by Chamlong, a popular politician, could be expected to draw even more.

Chamlong declared that he would take a 'fast' hunger strike by drinking only water, and refusing glucose, saline injection and medical attention. He predicted that he would die within seven days. He pointed out that he was in a better position to make this ultimate sacrifice than any other democratic leader because he had no children and no wealth to be concerned about. As a follower of the ascetic Santi Asoke Buddhist sect, he had a well-known practice of taking just one vegetarian meal a day, which further convinced many that he would collapse in a very short period of time. Hence, a stark choice between a person with high integrity (Chamlong) and a person who broke his promise (Suchinda) was presented.

Chamlong's strategy paid off. Overshadowing Chalard, his fast drew a much larger crowd and grabbed national attention. It turned him into the focal point of the anti-Suchinda campaign. Suchinda's response was as insensitive as it had been on Chalard. He said, 'If the government has to resign because somebody is fasting against it, then we may have to resign everyday' (cited in *Bangkok Post*, 6 May 1992, FBIS-EAS-92-088: 41). After five days and a week of continuous demonstration, the ruling coalition finally capitulated in making concession on constitution amendments.

Chamlong's fast appeared to have achieved far more than Chalard's three-week old hunger strike. Ironically, the strike by Chamlong was controversial from start to end. Critics suggested that Chamlong conducted his hunger strike in a paradoxically 'aggressive' manner. His 'fast' method, coupled with the assertion that he would die within seven days, forced a showdown with the regime, which might have resorted to a violent crackdown. However, the real concern of the CPD and the NGDO leaders was Chamlong's political motives. Chamlong's military background, his alleged role in the 1976 massacre and his subsequent performance in electoral politics never convinced them of his democratic commitment.<sup>36</sup> Campaign organisers worried that Chamlong might

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<sup>36</sup> Chamlong was a devoted follower of the Santi Asoke sect, which advocated a radical return to simplicity. They criticised the Sangha of excessive commercialisation, and appealed to followers to return to a non-materialist life style endorsed by Buddha himself. The criticisms against the Sangha eventually caused Santi Asoke serious difficulties with the state. On 6 August 1975, Santi Asoke declared independence from the Sangha. Such an action was an infringement of the Sangha Act, which required that all monks be affiliated to it. Nevertheless, Santi Asoke managed to avoid legal prosecution and continued to grow in membership and popularity, thanks, according to its detractors, to the protection of Colonel (later Major General) Chamlong Srimuang, who was the head of the powerful Young Turks military faction and the Secretary General for Prime Minister General Prem. In 1985, Chamlong ran for the Bangkok governorship. He was fondly referred to by his supporters as 'half monk-half man'. He ate a

hijack the demonstration to serve his political ambitions. The emphasis on his personal integrity and suitability (no wealth, no children, vegetarian diet, etc.) in taking the strike action raised more suspicion that he used this strategy to boost his personal popularity.

The most controversial part of Chamlong's hunger strike was the way he ended it. His reason for retaking food was that he had to return to full strength to lead the fight for democracy. He 'sounded out' the wishes of the demonstrators by asking them to clap hands if they would like him to end the fast. Demonstrators broke into applause, and Chamlong said he would respect their decision (AFP report on 9 May 1992, FBIS-EAS--92-091: 47). While he received the endorsement of the demonstrators on this action, this episode did not bode well with a campaign essentially to hold Suchinda accountable for breaking promises. Within the circle of campaign organisers, this strengthened scepticism regarding Chamlong's personal and political ambitions.

Despite these controversies, Chamlong's strike was an effective mobilisation weapon. It served as a catalyst in urging people to make a stand against a political wrong. It should also be clear, however, that people came out not merely because of Chamlong's personal influence. They also came out to fight a system widely seen as unjust and undemocratic. This was the reason that people were not dissuaded from participating even though Chamlong's leadership in the rally was not faultless and his intention suspected.

### **Discourses of Democracy**

In contemporary Thai history, the May uprising was unique in that all sides to the conflict, including the military, claimed either to be defending democracy or to rationalise their actions through democratic principles. For instance, from the inception of his premiership, Suchinda insisted that he had a democratic mandate to govern. He claimed that his appointment was constitutional and democratic. According to him, in the March election, people gave a mandate to the ruling coalition parties, which invited him to lead the government. Since he rose to the top post through parliamentary procedure, he maintained that his departure could only be through the same process. His refusal to resign under public pressure was equated with the defence of parliamentary democracy against mob rule.<sup>37</sup>

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vegetarian meal once per day, wore a simple farmer's garb, and practiced celibacy. His campaign on the governorship was tuned on the line of anti-corruption, and he was commonly referred to as 'Mr Clean'. He won the election with a landslide in 1985, and repeated it in 1990. Some NGOs were delighted that they had, in the money-dominated political scene, a popular and charismatic leader who ostensibly pursued a political path sharing with them a lot of similarities, such as democracy, anti-materialism and people's empowerment. However, others saw him as essentially an opportunist who knew how to rise on, and to shape his public image according to, popular opinions. His role as the leader of the dominant military faction, the Young Turks, which put a bloody end to student movement by allowing the 1976 massacre to take place, continued to haunt him (Taylor, 1990: 148, Suwanna, 1990: 403, Heikkila-Horn, 1996: 54, McCargo, 1997, and Rosi, 1995: 1045).

<sup>37</sup> See his interview with Army TV channel 5, 7 April 92, FBIS-EAS-92-068: 42.



For many, it was hypocritical that a coup leader, who had previously overthrown the constitution, now demanded that people respect the constitution and procedures. He attempted to alienate popular support of the demonstration by branding it an instigation of opposition politicians who organised it out of self-interest. During the 20 April demonstration, the military propaganda machine started to link extra-parliamentary protests with anti-democracy and anarchy. An Army radio broadcast threatened, ‘...democracy ... should not be a game played outside the parliament with no limits and no respect for political rules and regulations. This is not a democratic system, but a state of anarchy and lawlessness, a primitive society.’<sup>38</sup> Thus, any expression of dissent outside parliament was condemned to be an act appropriate only in a ‘primitive society’!

The resurgence of protest after Chamlong’s hunger strike led Suchinda to escalate his rhetoric against the protest. In an infamous speech made to the 7 May parliamentary session, he accused, NAP leader Chavalit of being sympathetic to communism and anti-monarchy, while Chamlong was accused of being anti-Buddhist.<sup>39</sup> Less commonly noted is that Suchinda made these accusations in a speech rationalising his acceptance of the premiership. He asserted that people gave him the democratic mandate because they wanted a strong leader to handle the threats posed to the nation, religion and monarchy. Apparently, the need to mix democracy with anti-communism and nationalism proved that the efficacy of these repressive labels was in decline. Suchinda attempted to construct a discourse meshing traditional nationalist and religious symbolism with the modern democratic aspirations against the protesters.

By brandishing these labels traditionally associated with the political right and the military, Suchinda appeared to think that protesters would be intimidated. On the contrary, Suchinda’s initiatives were met with deep scepticism. The attack on Chavalit and Chamlong was received with wide disbelief. To many Thai people, Chavalit was the mastermind behind the 66/2523 order,<sup>40</sup> which many considered responsible for the downfall of the CPT. While Chamlong’s brand of Buddhism was controversial, few disputed that he was a serious Buddhist. In addition, few protesters reckoned that their non-violent demonstration demanding merely that Suchinda honoured his promises could be accused of causing instability and destroying democracy and the nation. Thus, Suchinda’s message was received with a sense of outrage and disbelief

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<sup>38</sup> First Army Division Radio commentary, 20 April 1992, FBIS-EAS-92-079: 27.

<sup>39</sup> Specifically, Suchinda restated an old accusation against Chavalit – that he was sympathetic to a Soviet-style ‘Presidium Council’. The implementation of the Presidium Council implied the abolishment of the monarchy from the political system. In relation to Chamlong, Suchinda claimed that he destroyed the unity of Thai Buddhism by adhering to an illegal sect, Santi Asoke. Singling out Chamlong and Chavalit, the statement conveyed the message that the demonstration was actually organised by sore politicians who lost the March election (FBIS-EAS-92-089: 36).

<sup>40</sup> The 66/2523 Order gave amnesty to surrendered communists and their followers (see Morell and Chai-anan, 1981).

by demonstrators.<sup>41</sup> His allegations backfired. Whenever Suchinda claimed a democratic mandate to govern, he reminded people that he acquired power through illegitimate means. The demonstrators refused to accept Suchinda's definition of democracy simply as election and parliament. In any event, the military was not seen as a defender of democratic procedures.

Within the anti-military camps, there existed a diversity of concepts and expectations of democracy. The opposition parties – in particular, the Democrats and NAP – had one closest to that articulated by the military. For them, democracy meant a system of electing representatives to control political power. Their grievance against Suchinda was primarily that the military had usurped this power *from them*. Many opposition members of parliament were as concerned as the military about the potential for the demonstration to get out of control.<sup>42</sup> At any rate, even the lacklustre presence of the Democrat and NAP in the demonstration dissipated when Chamlong started his hunger strike on 4 May and became its indisputable leader. They calculated that endorsing the protest after that stage was tantamount to lending political capital to Chamlong. It reconfirmed the perception that many politicians and parties were more concerned about their interest than democracy, however defined.

The course of the demonstration indicated that the version of democracy articulated by the military and the political parties was rejected. If democracy was defined merely to be rules, order and stability, the system of corruption, injustice and abuse of power would not go away. Many protesters were impelled by a sense of responsibility to make a stand against the existing order, and to demand a more accountable system. When these reasonable demands were branded as communist-inspired and creating unrest, demonstrators became more determined to get rid of a regime out of touch with their aspirations, and which could not command their consent.

One of the defining characteristics of the anti-military mobilisation was spontaneity. People joined the demonstration out of their own accord. In addition to the existing networks of workers, NGOs, slum people, and students, many autonomous groups, such as 'Business Group for Democracy', 'Academics for Democracy', and 'Doctors for Democracy', proliferated to autonomously take up the democratic initiatives in making statements commenting on the development, in organising actions, and in informing and

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<sup>41</sup> These accusations have made protest organisers extraordinarily cautious in any actions related to Buddhism and the monarchy. For instance, Chamlong shifted the demonstration site from Sanam Luang to the Ratchadameon Avenue on 8 May because a major Buddhist event, the Buddhism Promotion Week, was going to take place there the next day. Staying put could have been interpreted as obstructing Buddhism. On 10 May, Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn's motorcade would pass through Ratchadameon Avenue en route to Sanam Luang for the Buddhism Promotion Week. Demonstrators cleared up the road and greeted the Princess on the sidewalk with national flags in their hands. Protestors tried to convey the message that they could be loyal subjects while simultaneously fighting for democracy (see Ubonrat, 1994: 104).

<sup>42</sup> Chuan Leekpai, the leader of the Democrats, spoke out against Chalard's fast, maintaining that democracy should best be fought inside the parliament, and that meant by MPs alone (see the *Bangkok Post*, 18 April 1992).

mobilising people in their sectors to join the demonstrations. It was a bottom-up exercise that was minimally coordinated by the democracy coalition comprising the CPD, the SFT and other groups. It was clear that the CPD and later, CFD, was not a top-down structure, and it had no hierarchy or resources to command the protesters to follow its lead. Its decisions were complied with to the extent that they conformed to the general wishes of the participants.

This democratic structure proved to be critical in the survival of the movement after the military crackdown on 18 May. The military believed that the arrest of Chamlong, and later, other CFD leaders, would cripple the opposition. On the contrary, people took their own initiatives in organising the resistance, which spread out from the rally ground to different parts of Bangkok and into the provinces. It was the stark realisation that the military would have to fight a popular revolt in almost every part of the country that made the entire ruling elite shiver. The military could arrest and eliminate the opposition leaders, but they could not arrest tens of thousands who were acting on their own, without a reliance on particular leaders.

### **Leader and the Masses: the Politics of Marching**

The protesters' spontaneity is a counterpoint to a leadership-focused analysis of protest movements. According to this latter type of analysis, Chamlong's demand for the resignation of Suchinda and his strategy of leading tens of thousands of protesters through the streets Bangkok eventually led to a bloody confrontation with the military because this action was provocative and reckless. The insistence on Suchinda's ouster left little room for compromise.<sup>43</sup> Beneath this allegation was a level of discourse that pointed to leadership conflicts within the democracy campaign. According to this view, Chamlong systemically usurped the leadership of the anti-Suchinda campaign from the moderate faction represented by the CPD. The conspiracy of ousting the soft-liners was achieved when the seven-person CFD was formed without any CPD representative. Consequently, the CFD followed Chamlong's more confrontational strategy, which eventually led to a bloody clampdown.

This approach, however, fails to account for leadership dynamics. In the first place, the primary issue dividing protest leaders was not on the substance of the demands. As we will see below, both CPD and Chamlong switched between the 'radical' demand for the immediate resignation of Suchinda, and the 'moderate' appeal for constitution amendment at various points of the campaign.<sup>44</sup> The key issue between them, I contend, was the suspicion by CPD

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<sup>43</sup> Immediately after the May crisis, this interpretation was crystallised into an accusation that 'Chamlong led people to die'. Assigning blame to Chamlong, this accusation served two main purposes. Firstly, it destroyed whatever political capital Chamlong might have gained from leading the anti-Suchinda campaign, and secondly, exonerated the military from the responsibility of the bloody massacre (see McCargo, 1997)

<sup>44</sup> The so-called moderate position demanded the adding of a provision in the constitution requiring the prime minister to be an elected member of the House. This provision might take effect after Suchinda served out his term. This was considered a face-saving measure for

and other activists of Chamlong's intention to manipulate the demonstration for his own self-interest. His unilateral decision to lead the demonstrators to march down Ratchadamoen Avenue on two successive nights (7 and 8 May) undermined the collective leadership and reinforced their long-held mistrust of him.

In the second place, the hardline-softline view assume that there was an internal struggle for control, which might destabilise the movement. However, the CPD consciously shunned divisive actions to the extent that it withdrew from the leadership to preserve unity. Its withdrawal arose out of an awareness that its most productive role in the democracy campaign was in education, conscientisation and anti-hegemonic struggle. Leading the street demonstration might be a task best left to leaders emerging from within the ranks of the demonstrators. Finally, the hardline-softline theory assumes that protesters were passive followers of their leaders, and hence, that leadership conflicts largely determined the course of the action. As it turned out, the protesters continually demanded that their leaders follow their wishes. CPD's withdrawal from the protest leadership was partly founded on its belief that demonstrators could not be easily manipulated (McCargo, 1997: 298).

These points can be illustrated by the events between Chamlong's launch of his fast (4 May) and the resumption of the demonstration after the constitutional amendment deal was dishonoured (17 May). During these fateful two weeks in May, the cleavages amongst the campaign organisers were exposed. They reflected a deeper concern over who really controlled the demonstration, and for what purposes.

The first march took place on the evening of 7 May – the fourth day of continuous protest in front of the parliament building. Earlier in the day, threatening force, General Issarapong demanded an end to the demonstration. This prompted some protester leaders to suggest that the demonstration be moved to the more open Sanam Luang, about two kilometres away. However, the majority decided to stay in front of the parliament. Chamlong apparently disregarded this decision, and started to move his followers to Sanam Luang at around 7:30 pm. To prevent chaos and confusion, other leaders asked the protesters to follow him. After the protestors reached Sanam Luang, Chamlong reportedly apologised to his fellow protest leaders for making the unilateral decision. In return, the latter thanked Chamlong for leading a spirit-boosting march. Apparently, the march raised morale, enticed more people to participate, and showed the strength of the protest. The initial reluctance of the CPD and SFT to go along with Chamlong's demand proved to many demonstrators their indecisiveness.<sup>45</sup>

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Suchinda because he was required to resign, not because of direct pressure from the demonstration, but because of changes in the constitution.

<sup>45</sup> *The Nation*, 17 May 1992. Somsak (1993: 105) described this march as 'a human movement ... shook the city to its foundations.' The march to Sanam Luang probably made the demonstration less vulnerable to a military crackdown at that time.

While these gestures signified a reconciliation, less than 24 hours later, the rift resurfaced. The issue was over the new protest site, where a Buddhist Makha Bucha ceremony, to be attended by high-ranking royalty, was scheduled to take place on Sunday 10 May. State-run radio stations had announced a demand for demonstrators to disperse so as not to disrupt the ceremony. During a strategy session held by protest leaders on the evening of 8 May, Chamlong wanted the demonstration to move back to the area close to the parliament building. Others did not want to take the risk of the move, probably anticipating the conclusion of a constitution amendment deal with the military-led coalition parties and thus the end of the demonstration before Sunday, and fearing that such a deal would be undone by the march. According to Somsak (1993: 107), Chamlong left the meeting and started the march while it was still in progress.

Unlike the previous march, both SFT and CPD refused to follow, and announced this. Meanwhile, Chamlong's procession was blocked by military barricades at the Pan Fah Bridge, just 200 meters down Ratchadamoen Road. An intense confrontation ensued. Realising that the military was determined to prevent the march, Chamlong turned the section of Ratchadamoen between the Democracy Monument and Pan Fah Bridge into the new rally ground.

The split within the movement was now obvious, symbolised by two demonstration centres: one at Sanam Luang and the other at the Democracy Monument. The Suchinda regime was quick to exploit this. State-controlled media reported that the anti-Suchinda coalition had collapsed, and that the CPD and SFT had withdrawn from the demonstration. This forced the CPD to issue a public denial. It further declared that it would join Chamlong at the Democracy Monument, and let him take over the leadership of the protest to prevent confusion and division (Murray, 1996: 140).

After these incidents, Chamlong emerged as the undisputed leader of the demonstration. At around 7:00 am on 9 May, he claimed that his ongoing hunger strike had weakened his body too much to undertake the task of leading the struggle, and asked the permission of his supporters to end the fast.<sup>46</sup> According to Chamlong's detractors, his behaviours during the demonstration were opportunistic through and through. He agitated the public by declaring a 'fast' hunger strike. He marginalised other protest leaders by twice leading the demonstrators into parades, disregarding their objection and at the risk of dividing the campaign. More seriously, he showed little concern for the safety of the protestors, overlooking the probability of provoking a military crackdown. After CPD and other leaders decided to call it quits from the campaign leadership, Chamlong used the excuse of leading the demonstration to terminate the fast, and thus broke his pledge.

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<sup>46</sup> In addition, Chamlong resigned from the chairmanship of Palang Dharma Party in order to lead a non-partisan struggle, and to fend off accusations that he intended to make political gain from his role in the movement.

The evidence used to further substantiate Chamlong's radicalism was his refusal to disperse the crowd after a constitution amendment deal had been reached between the ruling and opposition parties on 9 May. Chamlong was accused of brinkmanship and playing with the lives of the demonstrators by refusing to compromise even when there were rumours the military was preparing a coup and violent crackdown.<sup>47</sup>

The negotiations between the pro-military and opposition parties to amend the constitution began on Friday 8 May. The following evening, the deputy prime minister and the parliamentary president, Arthit Urairat, announced on TV that four amendments were accepted by the ruling parties, and would be tabled in parliament on 15 May.<sup>48</sup> When the protest leaders met that evening to consider the deal and future strategy, there were of two opinions. However, the differences were not matters of principles. The CPD leaders retreated from their earlier position of calling for the resignation of Suchinda and accepted the deal.<sup>49</sup> Against the perception of a hard-line attitude, Chamlong also backed down and accepted this position, but only after much persuasion and pressure from the CPD leaders. He, however, insisted on a more explicit promise from the ruling coalition parties and on an amendment timetable. Specifically, he demanded that Suchinda make a televised statement promising the completion of the constitution amendment within a month. However, after holding out for about 24 hours, Chamlong eventually gave up on this demand also.

In these events, it soon becomes clear that Chamlong was not the real radical. Rather, it was the demonstrators who found the constitution amendment deal inadequate. The deal was basically a promise made by a government with a deplorable record of keeping its word. To that point, there had been no tangible achievement from the week-long demonstration. The protesters, numbering 100,000 on the night of 9 May (*Bangkok Post* 11 May 1992, FBIS-EAS-92-092: 43-4), were suspicious of the deal as a ploy to end the demonstration. Speakers were howled down when they took to the stage to ask demonstrators to accept the deal and go home (Somsak, 1993: 110-111).

After Chamlong changed his position and spoke in favour of the constitution deal on the evening of 10 May, the protesters started to realise that their leaders had reached a consensus on the necessity of ending the demonstration. According to Somsak (1993: 113), it took another six hours (from 10:00 pm, May 10 to 4:00 am May 11) to convince people that it was time

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<sup>47</sup> The wild rumours of a coup apparently prompted a bizarre response from the military, setting up a hotline for people to call and confirm if there was a coup (*Bangkok Post* 10 May 1992).

<sup>48</sup> The four points were: the prime minister had to be an elected member of the House, the power of the Senate had to be reduced, the House spokesperson became the ex-officio president of the parliament, and the house met for two full sessions annually. In essence, these were the same demands for which people took to the street in December during the constitution campaign.

<sup>49</sup> When the demonstration started on 4 May, a letter signed by CPD and other protest groups was delivered to Suchinda. The last statement of the letter says, 'Please consider your own position and resign from the premiership.' The letter was reprinted in Somsak (1993: 99-100).

to call a truce, and they were convinced only after their leaders promised that the demonstration would resume in one week if the amendment deal was not honoured. The protesters reluctantly accepted this pledge as it was from their leaders, rather than from the ruling parties.

Less than a day after the crowd dispersed, leading members of the pro-military coalition started to backtrack on the constitutional deal, claiming that their negotiators had no authority to approve the deal, which still had to be submitted to and deliberated on by each of the parties in the ruling coalition. At this point, it was clear that the deal had been no more than a further lie designed simply to break up the demonstration. That left Chamlong and protest leaders no choice but to resume the demonstration.

On 14 May 1992, over 100 representatives from various groups participating in the campaign met in the Royal Hotel for four hours to discuss issues related to the resumption of the protest on 17 May. The most important outcome of the meeting was the formation of the Confederation for Democracy (CFD) with a seven-member committee to lead and coordinate the protest. This compact committee was designed to facilitate rapid responses to changing situations and to prevent miscommunication. Protest leaders agreed that the last round of protest was marked by indecisiveness, tardiness, and communication breakdowns.<sup>50</sup> More controversial, however, were the members elected to this committee. It was argued that Chamlong's radical strategy prevailed because his sympathisers dominated the CFD. Evidence of his domination was the absence of CPD executive members in the 7-person CFD committee.<sup>51</sup>

This view of CFD's radicalism and Chamlong's domination however, was based on simplistic logic. This logic expressed itself in two steps. Firstly, the CFD supported an uncompromising demand for Suchinda's resignation; hence it had to be on the radical side. Secondly, if it was on the radical side, then its members had to be in Chamlong's camp. While not discounting the mistrust and disagreement between Chamlong and the CPD, this logic is not credible as it neglects to conceptualise the formation of CFD on the circumstances after 11 May. Once the constitution deal was broken, it became meaningless to again demand constitutional changes. Suchinda and his clique had shown, again, that

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<sup>50</sup> Other than the problems with Chamlong, communications between protest leaders were not smooth. For instance, Somsak (1993: 110) complained that he was not informed of the 9 May meeting at which leaders decided to accept the constitution deal and to end the protest. During the 14 May meeting, the two criteria for the 7 CFD members were that they could afford to keep in touch with the demonstration around the clock, and they had to be accepted by the people (Somsak, 1993: 115).

<sup>51</sup> Apart from Chamlong, the other CFD members were: Sant Hatthirat, a medical doctor, former leader of the Folk Doctors Association and a member of the Academic Group for Democracy; Somsak Kosaisuk, a representative from the State Enterprise Relations Confederation; Pratheep Ungsongtham, a well-known NGO activist working in slums; Parinya Tevanarumitrakun of the Student Federation of Thailand; Jittravadee Vorachat, the daughter of hunger striker Chalard Vorachat; and Weng Tojirakan, another medical doctor, a former CPT returnee and a representative from the 14 October 1973 group (Somsak, 1993: 114). Dr. Weng and Dr. Sant's backgrounds are in Bamber (1997: 241).

they were not to be trusted, and were not interested in making concessions. This meant that anything less than Suchinda's resignation would be unacceptable to the protesters. The task entrusted to CFD was the re-launch of the protest for a clear goal: Suchinda's ousting.

The CPD stayed away from CFD partly to take responsibility for promoting the constitution deal that proved to be a failure. It was also partly from the desire to avoid further disagreement with Chamlong. Initially, Chamlong also refused to join. Only after intense lobbying did he accept the appointment.<sup>52</sup> Democracy leaders did not want to send out a signal of disunity by allowing Chamlong to stay outside the CFD. It was also likely that some of the leaders wanted to use the CFD to apply some discipline to Chamlong. However, fearing that too many conflicts inside the 7-member team would paralyse it, they elected only those with no open disagreement with Chamlong to serve in the committee. For Chamlong, the CFD was a non-party organisation to silence those critics who accused him of manipulating the demonstration for his own political ambitions. In any event, his popularity amongst the demonstrators would guarantee him a disproportionate influence. He could work with CFD if they co-operated. He might go his own way, if they refused.

The Chamlong-dominated CFD was accused of taking an irresponsible and provocative move on the night of 17 May 1992 – namely, leading the demonstrators down the route from Sanam Luang to Government House, again demanding Suchinda's resignation.<sup>53</sup> The march was again blocked at the Pan Fah Bridge. This time, however, Suchinda chose to use force to break up the demonstration. Three days of bloodshed ensued.

The march might have been unwise in the sense that it gave Suchinda an excuse to crack down on demonstrators and conveniently shift the blame to Chamlong. It is important, however, to identify the real provocateur. Nothing was more provocative than Suchinda's breaking the promise of not taking up the premiership and the failure to honour the constitution amendment deal. The main cause of the bloodshed was the deceitful acts of military leaders who still believed that they could disregard people's will by using military force.

There were strong indications that Suchinda and his generals had prepared for

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<sup>52</sup> Chamlong was absent from the 14 May meeting; he only sent his representatives. When he was nominated to the CFD committee, his representatives said that he did not want to be a member. The participants refused to accept this, and demanded Chamlong appear at the meeting. Finally, Chamlong arrived. Bowing to pressure, he accepted the nomination (McCargo, 1997: 255).

<sup>53</sup> Somsak has recounted the rationale for the march. At that time, CFD was concerned that Suchinda might not have been accurately briefed on the strength of popular demands. By moving the demonstration in front of his office, he would be able to see the crowd when he returned to work on Monday morning (18 May). It was also hoped that Suchinda would be forced to negotiate directly with the CFD. In the past, Suchinda had repeatedly avoided dealing with the demonstrators, claiming that his appointment to the prime ministership and the issues of constitutional amendment were the business of parliament and the ruling parties (Somsak, 1993: 117-8).



a crackdown, with or without a march. They ordered troops from upcountry to converge on Bangkok before the resumption of the demonstration. Initially, they hoped that once the demonstration was suspended on 11 May, popular passion would dissipate, and the political crisis would be defused. After the CFD issued the call for a resumption of protest activities on 17 May, government machinery was set in high gear to discourage people from joining the rally.<sup>54</sup> When it failed to deter a massive turnout on 17 May, Suchinda found himself facing a stark choice between suffering a humiliating step-down from power and ordering a violent crackdown on the demonstrators. His choice was clear when the first gunfire was heard a few hours into the demonstration.<sup>55</sup> The military put in motion Operation *Paireepinart* (destroy the enemy), a plan to suppress a communist uprising.

### **Middle Classes and the High-Tech War**

Who were these people who took to the streets night after night to protest, and finally deemed befitting a military operation designed to suppress armed communists? The Suchinda regime lumped them together as an undifferentiated anti-government mob. The Bangkok-based print media, however, projected a different image. They highlighted protesters' middle class origin, certified by their eye-catching paraphernalia such as mobile phones, business suits, automobiles and yoghurt, carried, worn, used or eaten by them during the demonstration. Witty, or perhaps, self-congratulatory, terms were coined to describe the crowd: mobile phone mob (*mob mue thue*), sedan mob (*mob rot keng*), picnic mob (*mob picnic*), yoghurt drinking mob (*mob nom priew*), and the like.<sup>56</sup> These terms signified that the demonstrators were educated, well-off, professional and peaceful. They intended to subvert the images of violence-prone, drunken, and 'rent-a-mob' crowds, that the Suchinda regime tried to impose on the demonstrators.

These terms served an important function to counter military propaganda during the struggle. Nonetheless, they also served another political function of confining the democracy movement as a 'middle class revolt' and, not altogether opaquely, into capitalist triumphalism. According to this view,

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<sup>54</sup> The government countered the call by organising pro-government demonstrations all over the country, by ordering provincial governors to prevent people from coming to Bangkok to join the demonstration, by extending the Buddhist week to deny CFD of the protest ground, and by forbidding the Bangkok municipal government to rent mobile toilets. Finally, Suchinda issued a warning that he could not guarantee there would be no violence if the demonstration reconvened.

<sup>55</sup> The military opened fire on 3:30 am 18 May 1992 at the demonstrators gathering at Pah Fah Bridge.

<sup>56</sup> See a list of these terms in *Bangkok Post*, 13 May 1992. 'Picnic mob' conveyed the jovial sentiments of the demonstrators who brought with them food, drinks and radio-cassette players as though going to a picnic. The 'yoghurt-drinking mob' referred to a scene when a speaker urged demonstrators not to consume alcohol. Protestors responded by raising their bottles of yoghurt beverages, distributed to them by the campaign organiser. It was telling that these terms – lacking a clear middle class connotation – were marginalised in the discourse on the May uprising in favour of the mobile phone and sedan mobs.

economic liberalisation produced both rapid economic growth and a sizable middle class. The latter had the resources and requisites to access uncensored news and information. The growth of this class rendered traditional strategies of controlling the content and spread of news, information, ideas and ultimately, people's thought, obsolete for them. Because the middle classes had the resources and means to enable them to think alternatively, they became the leading group in the anti-military struggle. In this connection, the term, 'mobile phone mob', was particularly evocative exactly because mobile phones symbolised the freedom of the middle classes to access and spread information without the circumscription and censorship of the state.

Thus the May demonstration took place at two levels: on the street and above it, over the airwaves. While the streets were taken over, albeit temporarily, by tens of thousands of demonstrators, the airwaves, in particular radio and television, were mainly a realm used by the dictator for propaganda and misinformation.<sup>57</sup> Anti-Suchinda protests were either unreported, or if reported, were characterised as anti-monarchy, anti-Buddhist, pro-communist and of 'mobs' that were violence-prone. The electronic media had always been an instrument of the powerful to suppress dissent.<sup>58</sup>

Nevertheless, media manipulation could no longer produce the desired effects because, with the arrival of the mobile phone and other new technologies, communication could not be completely monopolised. Middle class protesters related news, information and the happenings on the demonstration site to their friends, colleagues and relatives through their mobile phones, fax machines and pagers. Information technology gave them a means to bypass the state's electronic media monopoly, and allowed them to communicate without state mediation. This alternative network afforded them the resources to evaluate state-authorised messages. Censorship thus backfired. The electronic media irritated the middle classes because the messages so obviously misrepresented what they personally experienced during the demonstrations (Ubonrat, 1994: 103).

The dualistic media structure reinforced the perception that the May uprising was an urban middle class phenomenon. Television and radio were the main sources of information in rural areas. The independent print media, which

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<sup>57</sup> The press was the only major sector of mass media in private hands. State operated or controlled nearly all the television and radio stations. The production of news programs in these stations were under strict state supervision. News production in the electronic media was to reconfirm the existing political order and the strengthening of the national identity of Nation, Religion and King (Pasuk and Baker, 1995: 372). This dual structure of the media ownership has given the press an economic incentive to report news and analyses that were banned in the electronic media, or to present news in a more critical format. Some newspapers, such as *The Nation*, *Prachachat*, and *Sayam Rat*, were keen on cultivating an image that they are the source of 'unbiased' news, and their opinions represent the views of the people. It appeared that the more controlled the electronic media, and hence the more incredibility in the eyes of the people, the better was newspaper sale (Hamilton, 1991: 357 and Ubonrat 1991: 51).

<sup>58</sup> See Peter Ungpakorn's 'When Media Become Tools of Propaganda', *Bangkok Post*, 12 May 1992.

covered the demonstration intensively, were either not available, or came late. Since there were yet no mobile phone-wielding peasants, there was no way for them to plug into the middle class communication network. The peasantry, thus, was a deadweight on the democracy movement because its poverty and ignorance made it susceptible to the manipulation by the military regime. On many occasions, some were mobilised, paid and brought into Bangkok to demonstrate support for Suchinda.<sup>59</sup>

In this way, the May 1992 democracy movement underwent the process of appropriation and categorisation as a middle class movement. A Social Science Association survey, conducted during the 17 May demonstration, was widely used to confirm this. The survey revealed that 52 percent of the 2,000 surveyed demonstrators had a bachelor degree, 14.5 percent had higher qualification. Over 80 percent of them were white-collar workers, civil servants or businesspersons. As of income, the dominant portion, 45.5 percent, earned between 10,000-50,000 baht per month. Contesting this, critics like Suthy dismissed the survey as unscientific and claimed under-reporting of the presence of the workers and peasants.<sup>60</sup> This view was supported by some journalists at the time.<sup>61</sup> These controversies appear to be dominated by issues such as how many of, and in what proportion, the middle class participated in the demonstration. However, two equally important issues have been overlooked. Firstly, there was a tendency to ascribe a democratic orientation to the consciousness of the middle classes. Thus, the middle classes were assumed to be receptive to anti-Suchinda information if they had the freedom to seek out alternative news and ideas. I think there is no theoretical base for this case. Their consciousness should not be assumed, but instead, should be a subject of investigation. There is no dispute that the middle classes participated in the demonstration. But, they were not born democratic fighters or mobile phone warriors. Their democratic inclination was developed out of long periods of conscientisation and anti-hegemonic struggle.

It also needs to be understood that important elements of the middle class were primed for scepticism regarding the military's version of events in the electronic media. It is widely acknowledged that many of the participants in the 1992 events were from the '1973 generation', having been involved in the student

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<sup>59</sup> For instance, some 800 villagers gathered in the Army Auditorium in Bangkok on 6 April to support Suchinda's for the premiership. This crowd was dubbed the 'horse-face mob'. According to Callahan (1994: 345), the term was a literal translation of a theatrical term used to describe a group of people hired to applaud a public figure.

<sup>60</sup> Suthy (personal communication, 20 July 1996) pointed out that the random sample survey could not reveal a complete picture of the demonstrators. According to him, because of the deployment of security guards to prevent intruders and provocateurs, it was difficult for the interviewers to penetrate into the core of the demonstration ground, where workers, slum residents, students and other organised groups congregated. Interviewers could only carry out their work on the fringe, and thus encountered a disproportionate number of middle class people who joined in late, after business hours.

<sup>61</sup> See Paul Handley, 'Rainbow Coalition: Protesters came from Many Walks of Life', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 4 June 1992, p. 11-12.

movement of that time. (Bangkok Post, 1992: 70). Some of the more prominent former student activists, such as Seksan Prasertkul, Thirayuth Boonmee, Sant Hatthirat, Weng Tojrakan and Vitit Muntarhorn, became advisors and leaders of the anti-Suchinda struggle. At the same time, there were many who were less well known, but were volunteers and activists. The ground for the 1992 democracy movement was thus prepared well before, in the form of the student, CPT and NGDO movements. Thus, it was not simply a matter of whether an alternative version of events was available in the media, but rather that there was an audience who would seek it out and participate in its re-creation.

It is noticeable that CPD and NGDO leaders sought to expand the democracy campaign to the provinces. Connecting the middle classes with the rural and urban poor was seen as a most urgent task for NGDOs.<sup>62</sup> On the one hand, they brought the critiques of the poor into the public sphere. On the other, they tried to inform and involve the poor in the Bangkok events.

It is true that mobile phones and faxes broke down the state's news monopoly in Bangkok, and these gadgets were also deployed to bridge the communication gap with the rural population. The drama and the actions of the democracy campaign were played out in the areas surrounding the Democracy Monument. A more subtle media battle, however, was waged in the rural areas. In this respect, the anti-military campaign has scored some successes.<sup>63</sup> Rural mobilisations were synchronised with the events in Bangkok. Mobile phones linked people at different demonstration sites. Speeches were simultaneously heard in rally sites in different parts of the country, and this helped to engender a sense of common purpose to rise up against Suchinda, especially after the Bangkok demonstration was crushed.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> For instance, rural doctors posted news from satellite television broadcasts, and from fax and telephone messages, on the billboards outside hospitals (Bamber, 1997: 241). Scenes of the demonstrations were videotaped and distributed to the rural audience through the NGDOs network. On 13 May 1995, 15 NGDOs set up the Centre for the Promotion of Popular Participation in Democracy, which aimed to be an information clearing house for the democracy campaign. People were encouraged to call the centre's hotlines for current developments. According to Nimit Thianudom, a CPPD volunteer, calls started to flood into the centre starting 14 May, and most of them were from rural areas (see 'Bridging the May information Gap', *Thai Development Newsletter*, no. 21 1992, p. 6-7; also *Bangkok Post*, 15 May 1992).

<sup>63</sup> The first wave of the provincial anti-Suchinda campaign started on 8 May and mushroomed in Chiangmai, Khon Kaen, Songkhla and Surat Thani. Many organisers of these demonstrations were earlier involved with the PollWatch campaign (Suthy, 1995: 131). The resumption of the demonstration in Bangkok on 17 May also witnessed a corresponding mobilisation in the rural areas. Apparently, CFD members were assigned coordination duties in different regions. Somsak, for instance, was responsible for liaison with democracy groups in the South. During the night of 17 May, he announced to the Bangkok demonstrators that 30,000 and 60,000 people were rallying, respectively, in Hat Yai and in Nakhon Srithammarat. Other protests were carried out in the North and Northeast (Somsak, 1995: 115, 120; also see Table 1).

<sup>64</sup> Disathat Rojanalak, 'Technology Feature of Preparations' In *Bangkok Post* (1992, 61).

After the military opened fire at the demonstrators in the small hours of 18 May, four days of carnage ensued. Protesters came out, wave after wave, to resist the military. People, who were dispersed by the military in one area, swiftly regrouped in adjacent areas and staged another fight. Motorcycle gangs roamed the streets and played a cat-and-mouse game with the military, who sent out 'headhunters' to eliminate them.<sup>65</sup> Students defiantly set up barricades and dug bunkers around the Ramkhamhaeng University campus on 19 May, indicating that they were prepared to for a drawn-out confrontation with the military. On 20 May, 100,000 people amassed in the campus, defying the curfew and preparing for the attack (*Bangkok Post*, 21 May 1992, FBIS-EAS-92-099: 40). At the same time, leaders of the disbanded state enterprise unions prepared to call a national strike for 21 May.<sup>66</sup>

On 19 May, a number of demonstrations took place outside Bangkok demanding an end to the violence. The largest were in Nakhon Srithammarat and Chiangmai, with others in Khon Kaen, Songkhla, Krabi, Trang, Pattani, and Nakhon Ratchasima (*Bangkok Post*, 20 May 1992, FBIS-EAS-92-098: 46-7). The next day, even larger demonstrations were held in various provincial centres. The *Bangkok Post* recorded a total of 186,000 people demonstrating in 12 provinces (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Provincial Demonstrations on 20 May 1992**

Region	Province	Participants
Northeast	Nakhon Ratchasima	20,000
	Khon Kaen	30,000
	Ubon Ratchathani	20,000
Central	Nakhon Pathom	30,000
	Kanchanaburi	1,000
South	Songkhla	30,000
	Phatthalung	5,000
	Trang	10,000
	Nakhon Srithammarat	10,000
	Surat Thani	10,000
North	Yala	10,000
	Chiang Mai	10,000
<b>Total</b>		<b>186,000</b>

Source: *Bangkok Post*, 21 May 1992

In sum, the so-called middle class leadership of the democracy movement quickly unravelled under the weight of the violent crackdown. Persisting with the resistance were the urban underclasses and the people in rural areas. It

<sup>65</sup> Numbered a few hundred, they were mainly motorcycle taxis from the lanes of Bangkok. Many were migrants from rural areas. They often paid large sums to the police in exchange for a vest indicating that they were allowed to stay in the trade (*Bangkok Post*, 1992: 45).

<sup>66</sup> Somsak (1995: 128) and personal communication with Suthy (20 July 1996). Suthy was the chairperson of the Arom Pongpangan Foundation, a NGDO serving the labour sector.

was these people who carried the movement to its victory.<sup>67</sup>

Four days into the violent crackdown, and just after midnight on 20 May, the king appeared on TV demanding that Suchinda and Chamlong resolved their 'personal conflicts'. No sooner had the king staged the show and defused the crisis than his intervention was subjected to a popular deconstruction of its timing, namely, its 'lateness'.<sup>68</sup> This criticism carried a subtle implication that he waited, while people were being killed, until it was clear that Suchinda could not win the battle. Instead of saving people's lives, his intervention served to extricate the military from destruction. It was basically a salvage operation. The key to this operation was to portray the conflict as a personal rivalry between Suchinda and Chamlong, assigning a degree of blame to the latter. Playing on the popular perception of Chamlong's confrontational style, the message was that the military should not be held solely responsible for the bloodshed as it was provoked into opening fire. The king, in identifying the crisis as a personal power struggle between two protagonists, argued that there was no point in dragging the country into political instability. The crisis could be resolved at the personal level. *This royal version of the uprising exonerated the military of a large part of its responsibility for the massacre.* As it turned out, no military leaders were ever required to take responsibility for the blood-letting, as they were pardoned under the blanket amnesty issued shortly before Suchinda's resignation on 24 May. For Chamlong, his political career suffered a serious setback. He was held, at least partially, responsible for provoking the confrontation. The huge popularity he had won during the demonstration evaporated, and his political career was crushed.

Suchinda resigned on 24 May. A day later, a constitutional amendment bill was passed by parliament, which contained the four points agreed upon by the ruling coalition parties before the truce. Victims of the crisis were offered monetary compensation. Three separate investigations, by the parliament, the government and the defence ministry, were launched.<sup>69</sup> Anand was invited back to lead an interim government. It seemed that intense efforts were made to stabilise the explosive situation.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> One year after the killing ended, the Mahidol Hotline Centre, set up by NGOs to investigate and account for the dead, injured and missing of the uprising, released its findings. It confirmed that at least 44 people died, 736 people were injured and 98 people were missing. Out of those missing, 50 directly participated in the demonstration. The majority of the injured were workers – mainly single men living in Bangkok – indicating that they were very likely rural migrant workers (see *Thai Development Newsletter*, 1993, No. 22 p. 5). These figures confirm that working people were determined – even risking their lives – to resist the military. If the middle classes started the demonstration, the working class brought it to success.

<sup>68</sup> Bangkok Post (1992: 28). Explaining, the pro-royal Bangkok Post argued that the king needed to wait for the right moment to intervene because Suchinda might not listen to him.

<sup>69</sup> The military investigation was a whitewash. The other two achieved little because they lacked the power to compel witnesses to testify.

<sup>70</sup> In the parliament, all political parties were against the calling of a national election to resolve the crisis. Their concern was how to form a new government. Opposition parties claimed that the ruling coalition was partly responsible for the May massacre and should step down and let them takeover. The ruling coalition maintained that it still had the majority in parliament, and

After the appointment, Anand announced that he had two key mandates: reviving the economy and holding a national election in September. In the meantime, he took two steps against the military in order to pacify democracy groups demanding accountability from the military. Firstly, he reduced military influence in state enterprises, which were a source of the finances it needed for political intervention.<sup>71</sup> Secondly, he demoted a few top officers identified as leaders of the May crackdown, including Kaset, to 'inactive' posts.<sup>72</sup> By offering these minimal concessions, Anand tried to calm the situation.

## The Bangkok Uprising and the Rural Anti-KJK Campaign

While Anand was quick to normalise the situation in Bangkok, he did little to rectify the dislocations and grievances produced by KJK. The second Anand government recognised some errors in the implementation of KJK, but had no plan to reassess or shelve it. KJK never appeared to be high on Anand's

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was entitled to form a new government and to appoint a new prime minister. It proposed Somboon, leader of the Chat Thai party and a military protégé, to take over the premiership. CFD threatened to restart its demonstration if Somboon assumed the premiership. In addition, it demanded the repeal of the amnesty decree, that the military leaders responsible for the massacre be put on trial, that a full account of the dead and missing be made, and the dissolution of parliament. It warned that it would counter a military coup by calling a general strike and nationwide civil disobedience (*Bangkok Post*, 8 June 1992, FBIS-EAS-92-111: 54). Meanwhile, various right-wing groups such as Red Gaur, Thai Bats, and *Aphirak Chakkri* (Protect the Dynasty) re-emerged and threatened to mobilise their supporters to break up any demonstrations. These groups were an ominous reminder of the vigilante violence leading to the 1976 massacre and subsequent coup. Meanwhile, the military leaders responsible for the February coup and the May massacre remained in command. They maintained that they committed no impropriety because they followed all legal procedures throughout the May events, and their use of forces was justified to protect the nation, religion and monarchy. They also orchestrated a campaign to discredit the CFD leaders by attacking their Chinese ancestry (Reynolds, 1996: 139). Kaset, the supreme commander, refused to take blame by claiming, 'All Thais of the nation must be jointly responsible [for the May incident]' (see *Bangkok Post*, 22 May 1992, FBIS-EAS-92-100: 37). He further remarked that the military would not rule out another coup if 'lousy' political parties controlled government (*Bangkok Post*, 15 July 1992, FBIS-EAS-92-136: 37). Rumours of a coup spread again. The democracy leaders were thus circumscribed in their actions, trying to avoid giving a pretext for a coup.

<sup>71</sup> The primary target was the national carrier Thai Airways. The head of the air force, who was Kaset, traditionally chaired its board. On 13 July, Anand announced that the automatic right for the air force commander to assume the chair of Thai was abolished, and the presence of military officers on the board was drastically reduced. The demilitarisation process took place within the Telephone Organisation of Thailand and Communication Authority of Thailand. By removing the military influence, this process also facilitated the privatisation of state enterprises, which had been demanded for some time by the business sector (Murray, 1996: 193-5).

<sup>72</sup> On 1 August, Anand announced a major military reshuffle. Kaset, the supreme commander and air force commander, and Itsaraphong, the army commander, were transferred to become, respectively, military inspector general and deputy defence permanent secretary. A more 'professional' officer, General Wimon Wongwanit, who pledged to depoliticise the military, filled the army commander position. Suchinda had, of course, resigned from his military duties when he took over the premiership (*Bangkok Post*, 2 August 1992, FBIS-EAS-92-149: 42-3). While these changes were welcomed by democracy groups, they were not meant to bring these officers to justice.

agenda. However, when peasants demanded their share of the May victory, namely the shelving of the KJK, this became the litmus test of post-crisis democracy not only to the newly-installed Anand government, but also for urban-based democratic groups. It was a test to the latter because they were forced to make a choice between consolidating existing gains in the curtailment of military power in the political system, and mobilising to support for peasants' demands, which, as perceived by them, might give the military an excuse to launch another coup, and thus nullify whatever they had achieved. After the May uprising, the unity between peasant and middle class in fighting authoritarianism seemed to disintegrate. Peasants' goal to terminate the KJK seemed to conflict with that of the urban middle classes who wanted to postpone any mobilisation in order to consolidate the gains of the May uprising.

On 16 June, a hundred families from Dongyai, Buriram province, decided to return home and reclaim their land. However, their return was met with remarkably brutal force by armed forestry officials.<sup>73</sup> This incident triggered another wave of rural protest. Determined that they should not be ignored, the peasants resolved to march to Bangkok on 25 June via the US-funded Mitrphap ('Friendship') Highway, through which the Northeast was 'opened up' for 'development'. Now, social resistance was taking the same route back into the heart of Thailand's political and economic centre. Since the KJK was conceived and implemented from Bangkok, the march intended to hold Bangkok responsible for the actions (Pasuk, Sungsidh and Nualnoi, 1996: 63).

On 29 June, the demonstration caravan reached Pak Chong, in the last hills of the Korat Plateau. Organisers paused, partly to wait for others who were on their way to join the march, and partly to start negotiations with the government. As a tactic, they set up periodic blockades on the Highway, causing long traffic backups. At the end of three days of intermittent blockade (30 June-2 July), Anand dispatched officials to negotiate, and conceded to the demands of revoking the KJK and allowing evicted peasants to return to their land for the coming growing season. Though the peasants' demand for ownership title was not met, they accepted the compromise and hailed the demonstration a success. This success was not only measured by the concessions won, but also by the level of self-confidence and assertiveness demonstrated throughout the protest. Rather than begging for leniency, the peasant leaders came to the

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<sup>73</sup> In the process, 17 village leaders were arrested. On 18 June, villagers gathered outside the Nakhon Ratchasima provincial hall to demand the release of their fellow villagers. Simultaneous protests were staged in Khon Kaen and Bangkok. Learning that the cabinet was going to make a decision on KJK on 23 June, the Dongyai villagers resolved to continue their protest and wait for the decision. The result was that the Anand cabinet temporarily suspended KJK and announced a review, to be completed within 30 days. The villagers refused to accept this outcome because they feared that KJK would be resumed with minor adjustments. They were familiar with such government tactics and did not want to be trapped again. They demanded an unambiguous commitment to terminate the project, and legal ownership of their land. The following day, which was the 60th anniversary of the 1932 revolution, many NGOs, democracy and student groups showed solidarity with rallying peasants by celebrating the anniversary at the protest site.



negotiating table on equal footing, demanding accountability and respect.<sup>74</sup>

Concerned about the destabilising impact of rural demonstrations on the unsettled political situation, the CFD urged them to accept the 23 June cabinet decision, and publicly dissociated itself from the march. After the blockade of the Mitraphap Highway started, academics such as Kaewsan Atipho spoke out against the tactic because it created bad publicity and inconvenience for motorists, and hurt the economy. On the whole, the Bangkok middle classes were unmoved, if not negative, regarding the rural campaign. In contrast, slum residents and labour groups sent donations and delegations to Pak Chong to support the peasants' actions. Rural-oriented NGOs, particularly the Project for Ecological Recovery, and the student conservation groups, played a prominent role in supporting the demonstration. This KJK episode demonstrated that the peasant groups were able to take independent actions with or without the support of the urban middle classes.

## Conclusion

The marches on the Mitraphap Highway and Ratchadamoen Road were highly symbolic events on the long and meandering road of Thailand's democratisation. Drawing causal relations, commentators such as Pasuk and Baker (1995: 391) maintained that without the latter, there would not be the former. In other words, the fight to end the military regime created the democratic pre-conditions for the peasantry to rise against the KJK. However, this interpretation fails to take into account the changes in the wider socio-economic context – in particular, the threat to para-democracy posed by the resistance of peasant and workers. The suppression of this threat was the underlining reason that brought the military to stage the 1991 coup and subsequently triggered the May uprising. This interpretation also obscures the participation of the unprivileged in the fight for democracy. The site for the democratic struggle was not filled only by middle classes, and there was a 'Ratchadamoen Road' in many provinces during the May uprising. Only by ostracising this part of history can pluralists and post-modernists, identified in the early part of this paper, construct the empirical base to ground their theories. Similarly, without giving due recognition to the source of inspiration and credibility, it is difficult to account for the rallying potential of NGOs in building the social coalitions necessary to overcome the military regime.

The Bangkok uprising signified the rise of the unprivileged in demanding their

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<sup>74</sup> Initially, Anand sent a 'fact-finding' representative to Pak Chong, who was sent away by the peasants claiming that all the facts were known. Negotiation started only after Anand appointed another representative who was prepared to listen to demands. Peasant leaders insisted throughout the 8-hour bargaining session that the government representatives negotiate on their terms. The protestors chose the venue, set the agenda, imposed their moderator, and insisted on a written agreement from the government. At critical turning points, peasant leaders threatened to terminate the negotiation. To enhance transparency, the proceedings of the negotiation were taped, and played to the protestors outside the meeting room (Sanitsuda Ekachai, 'Victory for the Rural Poor', *Bangkok Post*, 9 July 1992).

voice be heard in the collective control of their destiny. In acting out the real substance of democracy, they destroyed para-democracy and enshrined consent rule in the political system. The end of military intervention in politics was manifested by the inclusion in the constitution of a highly symbolic provision requiring the prime minister to be an elected representative in parliament. The removal of military domination did not mean the end of exploitation and corruption. As it turned out, business politicians quickly filled up the political vacuum left behind by the military. Corruption and vote buying appeared to take a turn for the worse after the Bangkok uprising. However, without the 1992 uprising, the subsequent constitutional reform and various campaigns launched by the Assembly of Poor would still have had to face the hurdle of military intimidation. Business politicians would still have used the threat of a military coup to warn the unprivileged against making 'excessive' demands in their fight for justice and democracy. Removing coercion as a legitimate force in politics, the 1992 people's uprising played a historical role in moving democracy beyond the para-democratic phase.

## Appendix A: Chronology of the May Uprising

- 8 April Suchinda sworn in as prime minister; former MP Chalard Vorachat starts hunger strike. A number of student leaders, labour activists and NGDO workers join Chalard's campaign.
- 17 April Cabinet list announced. 11 'unusually rich' included in the 48-persons list.
- 20 April The first major rally held at the Royal Plaza with a turn out of 50,000 persons.
- 4 May Chamlong announces his hunger strike at the end of the second rally held at Sanam Luang with 60,000 participants. Tens of thousands turn out each night to join the continuous demonstration.
- 7 May Chamlong unilaterally marches 150,000 demonstrators from parliament house to Sanam Luang (1<sup>st</sup> march)
- 8 May Chamlong marches demonstrators from Sanam Luang to Royal Plaza (2<sup>nd</sup> march).
- 9 May The ruling parties agree with constitution amendment. Chamlong ends his hunger strike. The rally ends on the condition that it would resume in one week if the ruling parties fail to honour the agreement.
- 10 May The ruling parties start to back-pedal on their promises by claiming that Arthit Urairat, the House speaker and deputy leader of STP, had no authority from them to make the promise regarding constitution amendment with the rally leaders. Campaign organisers set up the Confederation of Democracy (CFD) to prepare for the resumption of the rally on 17 May.
- 17 May Demonstration resume at Sanam Luang. CFD resolve to march demonstrators to Government House at 9:00 pm to demand Suchinda's resignation (3rd March). The march blocked at Pan Fah Bridge by the army; a tense standoff ensues.
- 18 May A state of emergency declared in the early morning. Soldiers open fire on demonstrators. The demonstrators hold their ground and refuse to disperse. At 3:00 pm, Chamlong arrested. Despite this, demonstrators continue a running battle with soldiers. Motorcyclists roam the streets and attack government buildings and other symbols of authority. The military sends out hit squads to eliminate the motorcyclists. Thousands barricade themselves at the Ramhamhaeng University campus to continue the resistance.
- 19 May Rallies mushroom in provincial capitals, including Songkhla, Krabi, Trang, Pattani, Ratchasima and Khon Kaen.
- 20 May The King appears with Suchinda and Chamlong on television. He asks the two opponents to end their 'personal conflicts' in the interest of national unity. After the audience, Chamlong makes a brief speech urging demonstrators to go home and to end the 'chaos'.
- 24 May Suchinda resigns from the prime ministership, after issuing a blanket amnesty to officers involved in the massacre.

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