

McCargo, Duncan and Ukrist Pathmanand (2005) *The Thaksinization of Thailand*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press. 256 pages. ISBN 87-91114-45-4 (cloth) ISBN 87-91114-46-2 (paper).

Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's February 2005 electoral triumph came as no surprise. His main challengers—convinced of inevitable defeat—ran a minimalist, anti-extinction campaign hedged on an ultimately futile plea to retain a 201 member opposition.¹ Their unsuccessful campaign illuminates the Prime Minister's political, commercial and discursive ascendancy as embodied in his Thai Rak Thai party and various business ventures. Thaksin as man, myth and monster has assumed a lofty position: he is a person of incredible wealth, prestige and power.

In this environment of bubbling "Thaksin-mania", the Prime Minister's life and policies have been fodder for much scholarly and journalistic reflection. He has inspired a large number of Thai language books—including biographies, critiques and policy guides—and is the subject of much recent English language political writing about Thailand. An example is Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker's *Thaksin: The Business of Politics in Thailand* (2004), which seeks to chronicle the way that Thaksin has reshaped the country's political and economic order to suit his own interests. Adding to this growing literature on Thaksin's political success and future prospects is this timely contribution, *The Thaksinization of Thailand*.

The book—co-written by Duncan McCargo from the University of Leeds, and Chulalongkorn University political economist Ukrist Pathmanand—probes Thaksin's "multifaceted political identity" (1). Their stated ambitions are modest as "there is already ample material available for numerous important books on Thaksin's premiership" (20). Within their study, the focus is five major areas of the Thaksin phenomenon: "his involvement in the telecommunications industry, his creation of Thai Rak Thai, his relationship with the military, his use of language and media and his involvement in new forms of political economy networks" (20). Even occasional observers of Thai politics and Thaksin's first four years as Prime Minister will recognize that these are crucial areas for analysis and critique.

¹ Thailand's 1997 constitution requires two fifths of the 500 member lower house for a motion to censure the Prime Minister.

As in many similar collaborative ventures, McCargo and Ukrist wrote their assigned Chapters independently. However, both authors consistently deploy impressive repositories of political anecdote and trivia. Their footnotes give unusual insight into the personalities and families that define elite political relationships. Such details are often difficult for outsiders to access. The various games “played” by Thai politicians include their share of light-hearted, ironic and deeply troubling moments. These moments are critical ammunition for this study and illuminate the colorful and controversial scene of Thai politics in the Thaksin era.

Much of the book is meticulous, assembling a good range of academic, anecdotal and media material to support a wide-ranging thesis about Thaksin and his influence on Thailand. An example is a short section in Chapter 4 which describes the ascent of Thaksin’s cousin, General Chaisit Shinawatra to the position of Commander in Chief of the Royal Thai Army. As they emphasise, he is not the only Shinawatra family connection to benefit from Thaksin’s patronage. The account of Chaisit ranges across time and space to cover his “middle-class family” (146), “average” financial means and, crucially, the way that he has developed a wide circle of associates including some “prominent criminals” (152). According to McCargo and Ukrist, Chaisit’s elevation is illustrative of large-scale re-shuffles that saw Thaksin promoting his closest allies—including many school-friends—to key military posts: “creating for himself a remarkable base of loyal supporters” (147).

This system of appointing loyal friends and ensuring ever greater political dominance is symptomatic of the process of “Thaksinization”. However, the awkward contradictions inherent to Thaksin’s rule are mercilessly unpicked via the collective wisdom of these two very astute political observers. The fascinating profiles of the indispensable, “digital” Thai Rak Thai strategy boffins (93-99) contrast sharply with the descriptions of “analogue” Army Generals who Thaksin moves to prestigious but insignificant “posts as advisors to the prime minister” (151). They were shifted away from military command positions which, with characteristic awareness, McCargo and Ukrist describe as the filling of “largely meaningless advisory positions...a standard means by which senior figures establish patronage networks and attempt to secure support” (footnote 76, 163). Fluent and comprehensive descriptions of such “inside” issues are often missing in the popular media. McCargo and Ukrist have made an

important contribution by describing the varied personalities and trajectories in the Thaksin universe.

That universe is given a thorough critique in Chapter 5, which is a stand-out in this wide-ranging book. The Chapter traces the unique (for Thailand) way that Thaksin has succeeded “through the assiduous use of marketing, a strong emphasis on language and systematic attempts to influence and control the country’s media” (166). As the Chapter explores Thaksin’s marketing, media and linguistic spectacle, comparisons are made with the non-Thai experience of political campaigning and spin. According to McCargo and Ukrist, “Thai Rak Thai was the inheritor of this Clinton-Blair mantle of deft re-branding, the re-creation of words and images” (167). The subsequent analysis of Thaksin’s political discourse opens many interesting avenues for further enquiry and reflection. The rapid creation and re-creation of such a dominant player certainly raises questions about political longevity and the durability of *any* spin.

In this vein, the conclusion offers important—if very brief—observations on the future of Thaksin and Thai political economy. The various permutations of Thailand and Thaksin, Incorporated and Disincorporated, raise challenging hypothetical situations. Particularly thought-provoking is the scenario touted as “Thaksin Disincorporated”. According to McCargo and Ukrist, it “does not require an economic collapse to topple Thaksin” (252). Rather, a disintegration of Thaksin’s networks and powerbase could be based on “a monumental political crisis”. They hint that “Thaksin’s increasingly rapacious interventionism – such as recent attempts to politicize the process of monastic promotions – has the capacity to antagonize ultra-conservative forces in Thai society” (252). Highlighting what they call “essentially dysfunctional” (252) institutional mechanisms, McCargo and Ukrist foreshadow a time when the “present King would not be on the throne” (252) and when “Thailand’s profoundly malleable political order” (253) may lead to a post-Thaksin polity.

By canvassing so many crucial issues about the future of Thai democracy, McCargo and Ukrist have made a special contribution to our understanding of Thaksin and his Thailand. What becomes clear is that future Thai democratic development and

electoral outcomes are intimately connected with the abilities and aspirations of the Thaksin elite. Understanding this political establishment is a crucial scholarly challenge. In their “modest attempt to review a number of important issues” (preface), the authors offer much insight and counsel. As a synthesis of the Thaksin juggernaut—and a tentative argument about its place in Thai political history—this is essential reading.

Reference

Phongphaichit, Pasuk and Chris Baker (2004) *Thaksin: The Business of Politics in Thailand*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books. 301 pages. ISBN: 974-9575-55-5.

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