

Authoritarian orientations in Thailand

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- DRAFT -

Political developments in Thailand since the promulgation of the 1997 constitution are exemplary indicators that democracy can hardly be brought about simply by a judicative process. Even though the constitution granted democratic rights and provided procedures for political consensus building and bargaining, it allowed the rise of semi-authoritarian politics instigated during the first Thaksin government. Since the Thaksin governments, Thailand can be cited as a nearly paradigmatic case characterized by the leaders' determination to maintain political power by using non-democratic means within the framework of a democratic constitution (Sondrol 1997, 2007). It indicates that democratization requires more than constitutions. It has to be based on the political subjects, as well. The institutionalization of democratic governance requires a legal framework (constitution) but beyond that a democratic orientation of those in positions of political power, as well as the population at large, the citizens.

Even though the elites and political leadership in Thailand prefer a more authoritarian pattern of political rule, repression is rather limited. In fact except laws concerning *lèse-majesté* there is neither censorship of the press nor laws that prohibit public assemblies and demonstrations or free association in trade unions, parties or NGOs. In other words, formally civil liberties do exist in Thailand. Therefore it would be misleading to speak of "authoritarianism" and even more so of "totalitarianism" in Thailand. In fact, the current situation (August 2008) in which government house is besieged for an extended period suggests that the government is limited in what it can do with regards to repressive means. Interestingly, those now claiming democratic rights for their actions do not have democratization in their agenda. Why are then civil rights not used for democratic ends, but by a few leaders who apply these rights for their own authoritarian interests? Why is this not only accepted by most, but even more, appreciated by many? Is the population at large content with semi-authoritarian rule and might even prefer this to more democratic forms?

One explanation for this state is the prevalence of patronage and webs of personalized relations. Through patronage the political process is not determined by procedures and programmes but by persons. As Eisenstadt, Roninger (1984) maintain, patronage indicates a low degree of social cohesion within society in general and the elites in particular. In other words, patronage and personalization prevail where formal institutions are not really established and working. Instead of relying on rights people prefer to rely on more powerful persons and leaders that might be able to deliver. It implies as well that when the patrons or leaders do not deliver as expected and promised, the "clients" easily shift their allegiance to another leader. Thereby the system of alliances becomes highly fluid and individualising with regards to the leaders, which results in personal competition. In this struggle for personal power, leaders mobilize clients to push forth their particular interests which are sometimes transparent, but more often hidden behind a facade. As a result there are no institutionalized channels by which ordinary citizens participate in the core political process (such as local branches of political parties).

Why do the people widely accept being pushed out of the political process? Are they content to act as bystanders or mere tools of leaders? One explanation could be that many prefer that

others, who are respected even only temporarily as leaders, take decisions for them, and tell them what to do. Thereby the individual can claim not to be responsible for his social environment and avoid the hard, contentious daily work which democracy requires from its citizens. Such a personalization of social and political relations and orientation towards leaders instead of self-reliance are traits commonly associated with an “authoritarian personality”¹. Authoritarian personalities, on the one hand, tend to rely on and are obedient to authoritarian acts of superiors and, on the other, behave in an authoritarian fashion towards subalterns. In such a perspective the authoritarian inclinations of political elites finds a correspondence in the authoritarian orientation of the people.

In our preliminary study we applied concepts developed in the context of the “Studies in Prejudice” conducted in the 1940’s in the USA (Adorno 1973). In contrast to their voluminous research our approach is far more modest. The focus of Adorno’s studies was a psychological (or rather psycho-analytical) analysis’ of prejudices as well as the tendency towards fascism. We were not interested in psychological aspects, and therefore do not speak about “personality” in our study, but focus on basic orientations towards the role of leaders, religion, political processes, relations to parents etc. The questions follow examples formulated in the “Studies of Prejudice” modified for the situation in Thailand. In total 162 persons have been interviewed with standardized questionnaires in Narathiwat and Yala in 2008.²

The sample:

The study was intended to be quite simple. The main intention was to provide some basic data on orientations in Southern Thailand as one element for the analysis of violence in the Deep South. Therefore there was no intention that the results would be representative for the whole of Thailand. However, the results are quite clear in their general direction, so much so that we think that, combined with other data and current developments, these basic results are not only typical for these two southern provinces.

In the following we provide basic data on the sample:

GENDER			AGE			
	Frequency	Percent		Frequency	Percent	
Valid	male	52	Valid	18-20	6	3,7
	female	109		21-29	91	55,8
	no answer	1		30-39	38	23,3
	Total	162		40-49	14	8,6
Missing	System	1	50-59	13	8,0	
Total		163	100,0	Total		162

¹ Authoritarian personality can be defined as a coherent personality structure which combines unquestioned subordination and obedience, intolerance of weakness of others with the rejection of members of groups other than one’s own.

² This study is part of a larger project financed by the German Research Foundation (DFG) on “Religious Dimensions of Local Conflicts: A Comparative Study of Sri Lanka, Burma and Southern Thailand”.

EDUCATION		Frequency	Percent	Current employment	Frequency	Percent
Valid	primary level	1	,6	civil servant	85	52,1
	secondary	4	2,5	employee	28	17,2
	upper secondary certificate	10	6,1	merchant/bussiness	2	1,2
	diploma	3	1,8	labourer	5	3,1
	bachelor	17	10,4	student	21	12,9
	master or higher	117	71,8	housewife	3	1,8
	Total	10	6,1	unemployed	12	7,4
	System	162	99,4	others	6	3,7
Missing	System	1	,6	Total	162	99,4
Total		163	100,0	Missing	System	1
				Total	163	100,0

Our study focused on holders of university degrees and students. Obviously, the gender distribution is not equal, either. Women are overrepresented. One reason is that many interviews were conducted by a female assistant, who had the tendency to select more women than men. Secondly, many interviews were conducted in the universities, where more women than men are enrolled. This explains also the high level of education of many respondents and that the age group of 21 – 29 is overrepresented.

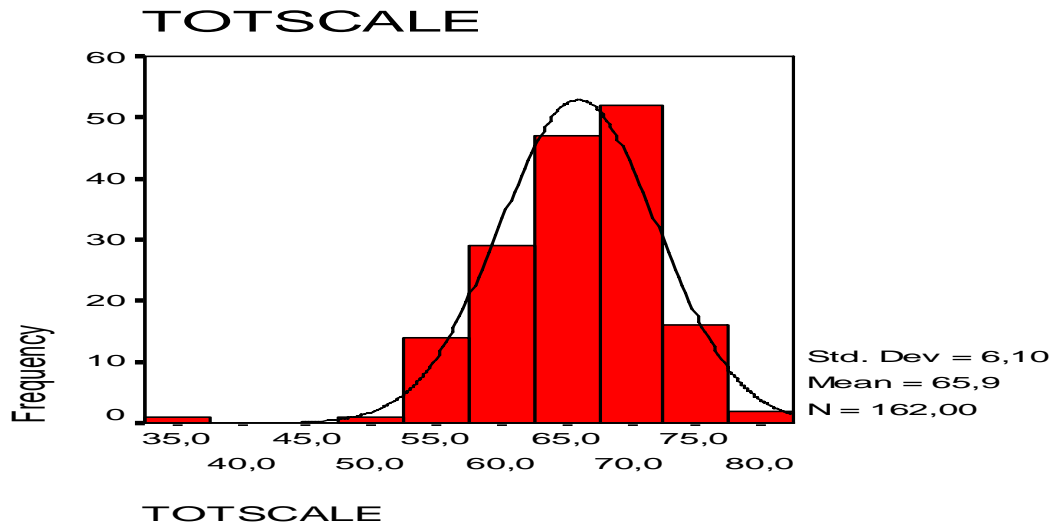
It can be expected that due to these specific aspects of the sample (younger women with a higher education) the authoritarian orientation might be underestimated. Modernisation theory assumes that among persons with a higher education an authoritarian orientation is less visible, because these are assumed to use critical reflection and therefore do not easily believe in ideologies. In addition, better educated persons are thought to rely on their own competences and capabilities for judgement, as this is what they apparently learned at university. This contrasts to an orientation where others are supposed to tell one what to do. Finally, better educated persons are versed in communication and interaction, and thereby more equipped to deal with conflicts in an interactive way of negotiation.

Our questions do not measure actual behaviour, but basic orientations. This became most evident with regard to discipline, which is highly valued by most of the interviewees. However, there is little doubt that discipline is not a major behavioural trait in Thailand, where individualism dominates in daily life. In many cases discrepancies and tensions between orientations and real behaviour are obvious. However, orientations and projections are not irrelevant. They provide indicators of what persons expect and appreciate. Here the basic finding of the prevalence of a strong authoritarian orientation is clear cut. We think that it has implications for democratization. The inclination of the people to resist authoritarianism is very limited. In contrast, authoritarian behaviour is expected and appreciated.

Basic findings: a prevalence of an authoritarian orientation

Except basic questions to characterize the sample, all questions raised were ranked in how far respondents agree or disagree to statements on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). All statements directly or indirectly implied authoritarian orientations. Therefore, the more respondents agree to a statement, the more we assume an authoritarian orientation.

To get a first impression, a simple scale adding all values for the answers was constructed, as a general “authority scale”. In total 23 questions were asked and ranked from 1 to 4, where 4 (strongly agree) indicates an authoritarian orientation (AO). A non-authoritarian orientation reaches from 23 (as extreme) to 46. While scores higher than 46 already indicate levels of AO, scores of more than 69 indicate a strongly authoritarian inclination. The maximum would be 92. The distribution we found indicates a quite high degree of an authoritarian orientation.



With a mean of 66 the prevalence of an authoritarian orientation is clearly pronounced. That such an orientation is quite generalized is indicated by the small number of respondents who are not or even less authoritarian in their orientation (a score below 46). We assume that, based on these data, it can be assumed that in Thailand we have strong authoritarian orientations. This becomes even more evident, when we split the total into groups.

Degree of authoritarian orientation		
Low (< 46)	Average (46 – 67)	Strong (68 – 72)
1	92	60
>1%	56%	43%

Keeping in mind that the majority of those ranked as “average” have ranks higher than 60 (nearly 30%) and that only one person scores “low”, the prevalence of an authoritarian orientation is apparent. Interestingly, the authoritarian orientation is not correlated with education, age, gender etc. and can therefore be taken as a general trait. Only with regards to age, those older than 40 and especially those older than 50 tend to have a lower ranking.³ Concerning education those with upper secondary tend to have lower scores while those with a certificate rank highest. One explanation could be that those with a certificate are frustrated

³ This is a bit surprising, as commonly it is expected that younger people are more rebellious against authorities than older. It might, however, indicate a shift going on as well. Those who are now 40 and older have experienced a period of democratization in Thailand, while especially the younger ones have more experience from consumerism and semi-authoritarian populism.

and want easy “strong-man-solutions”. For persons with a higher education (Bachelor and Master Degree) the results are in line with the general averages. Obviously, a higher education does not induce a more critical thinking and reflection. This is worrisome, as usually persons with a better education and higher income (the middle classes) are taken as “modern men” who might push for democratization. In Thailand it seems more to be the case that this stratum is part of the conservative, authoritarian field.

Through cross-tabulations we tried to identify basic characteristics of those who have a strong or a weak AO. The general scale was split into groups with about 20% of the respondents. A special group was defined by the highest scoring 10%. The data have to be used with caution as in most tables several boxes have a value of zero. For most answers it was not a questions of agree or don’t agree, but rather agree and strongly agree. In other words, we are not discussing authoritarian versus non-authoritarian orientations, but rather more or less authoritarian orientations. Nevertheless, looking only at rough trends, the following tendencies can be pointed at:

1. Civil servants tend to score lower, while unemployed persons score highest; students also have a stronger AO.
2. Older persons (40 and more) score lower.
3. There is no relation between gender and AO.
4. Interestingly, children whose parents have a higher education tend to have higher scores.

Authoritarian orientation on selected issues:

In a first step towards gaining a better understanding of the intricacies of the authoritarian orientation, we sorted the questions based on the degree of AO in the answers. The following table shows all those answers were most respondents *did not* agree to the authoritarian orientation:

Question	No*	Yes	Yes!
1. Religious leaders who studied abroad are more knowledgeable than locals	130	23	9
2. People can be distinguished into the weak and the powerful	89	63	9
3. Religious knowledge is more important than other knowledge	80	62	19
4. Those without a proper upbringing can not expect to get along with those who have a better education	76	70	16
18. One should not think critically about religion and only believe in what is told by others	65	62	30

*No= respondent did disagree, Yes = respondent agreed, Yes! = Respondent did strongly agree

Although the questions refer to different fields like religion, general world views etc. it is interesting that with regards to religion a certain ambivalence is expressed. Obviously, when turning to question 1, a foreign education does not provide higher prestige. Question 18 has to be interpreted with caution, because in difference to the other questions a negation indicates

the authoritarian orientation.⁴ Interestingly, a world view of a polarized and stratified world (questions 2 and 3) is not strongly expressed. Here patronage could be an explanation. In clearly stratified class societies an elite faces the minors, while where patronage prevails different networks compete with each other.

To get the other extreme, the following table lists all questions where the majority **strongly agreed**, indicating a stronger authoritarian orientation:

11. Everybody should believe in god and should not doubt what god does	19	27	115
12. We have to believe what is written in the holy books	3	46	112
13. No one is worse then a person who does not love his parents, respects them highly and is full of gratitude to them	3	53	105
14. Obedience and respect towards authorities is the most important issue children have to learn	7	45	100
15. Sexual abusers of children and women should not be treated by jail only. These persons should publicly be punished by beatings etc.	16	49	96
16. Society needs strong and courageous leaders	6	70	86
17. If people would talk less and work more, then life would be better for all	15	63	84

Here too, we have a very mixed grouping reaching from religion to leaders and criminality. However, with regards to religion and relations to the parents, a clear authoritarian orientation is obvious. As already mentioned, there is a strong endorsement of discipline (questions 13 and 14), which obviously contrasts to real behaviour in Thai society. It seems that there is a wish that everybody should be disciplined and, keeping in mind question 16, that strong leaders would push forth such a disciplined behaviour. As the level of disagreement with these statements is very low, it can be assumed that views expressed in the statements are widely shared and endorsed.

The final table covers those answers where the majority *agreed*:

21. Who insults us has to be punished	12	107	43
22. Sciences have their reason, but there are many important issues and questions humans will never be able to comprehend	11	105	46
23. Often there are reasons unknown to us why people become the victim of violence	14	103	42
24. When one has problems it is best not to think about it but have fun and enjoy oneself	17	101	43
25. What the young people need is discipline, decidedness and the wish to work and fight for nation	9	101	51
26. Youth sometimes have rebellious ideas but when they grow up, they become reasonable	30	97	35

⁴ In calculating the authority scale this has of course been taken into consideration.

27. Much would improve if criminality is really under control	4	87	70
28. If we try hard enough, all problems can be solved	17	84	61
29. We should accept what religious leaders tell us	34	80	45
30 Homosexuals should be punished	39	72	48

Again, we can see a mixed result: except question 30 and the last three questions, the respondents widely agreed with the statements. Most of the statements here refer to solutions to problems following a strict “strong hand” approach. This fits with the answers on discipline.

This mixed result may be explained by the tendency that that an authoritarian orientation is not limited to specific spheres, but rather covers all different fields of life and is thereby reinforcing itself. In addition, one trait of authoritarian orientations is that information from various sources on various issues is combined in specific ways, often connected through conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories are typical for societies, which have a weak understanding of themselves and in which the political process is dominated by personalised politics “behind the scenes”.

In a next step we computed the different questions into wider fields. Even though in all fields the scores are high, slight variations can be identified:

Religion	21%*	33%	45%
3. Religious knowledge is more important than other knowledge	80	62	19
11. Everybody should believe in god and not doubt what god does	19	27	115
29. We should accept what religious leaders tell us	34	80	45
12. We have to believe what is written in the holy books	3	46	112

* The percentages indicate the distribution of respondents aggregated from the statements below, i.e. in how far respondents disagree, agree or strongly agree.

Adding the questions dealing with religion together provides a more mixed picture. Keeping in mind a strong religious orientation, the answers to question 3 are surprising, and are probably caused by the fact that most respondents have a university education. Interestingly, the religious orientation, as indicated by questions 11 and 12, does not imply to follow religious leaders. The question is whether this is based on a general scepticism concerning leaders, or that people have been frustrated in the recent past by religious leaders who together with politicians used religion to gain votes in the Deep South. Connecting question 29 with the general question on leaders (question 16) can provide some more information.

		Follow religious leaders					Total
		0	strongly disagree	not agree	agree	strongly agree	
Society needs strong leaders	strongly disagree	0	0	0	1	0	1
	not agree	0	0	1	3	1	5
	agree	3	0	15	36	16	70
	strongly agree	0	1	17	40	28	86
Total		3	1	33	80	45	162

Even though in both cases we are looking at leadership, the variables are not correlated ($V = 0,1!$). This has to be taken with caution though. Only one respondent disagrees with strong leadership! However, 33 respondents (21%) appreciate strong leadership, but not by religious leaders. Nevertheless, the majority (120 respondents, 76%) wants strong leadership and accepts that this leadership comes from religious leaders.

Connected to leadership is the acceptance of the authority of the parents as the first who define how the child should decide. The parents in that way are the first patrons, or the patrons/leaders as the “parents” of the grown ups,

Parents	8%	46%	45%
13. No one is worse than a person who does not love his parents, respects them highly and is full of gratitude to them	3	53	105
Discipline	9%	50%	38%
25. What the young people need is discipline, decidedness and the wish to work and fight for nation	9	101	51
14. Obedience and respect towards authorities is the most important issue children have to learn	7	45	100
26. Youth sometimes have rebellious ideas but when they grow up, they become reasonable	30	97	35

It is clearly shown that the parents should be highly respected and that discipline and obedience is of high value. If obedience to the parents is connected to acceptance of leadership, then there should be correlations between the question dealing with leadership (16) and those dealing with discipline (14 and 25).

		Young people need discipline				Total
		0	not agree	agree	strongly agree	
leadership	strongly disagree	0	1	0	0	1
	not agree	0	0	5	0	5
	agree	0	5	57	8	70
	strongly agree	1	3	39	43	86
Total		1	9	101	51	162

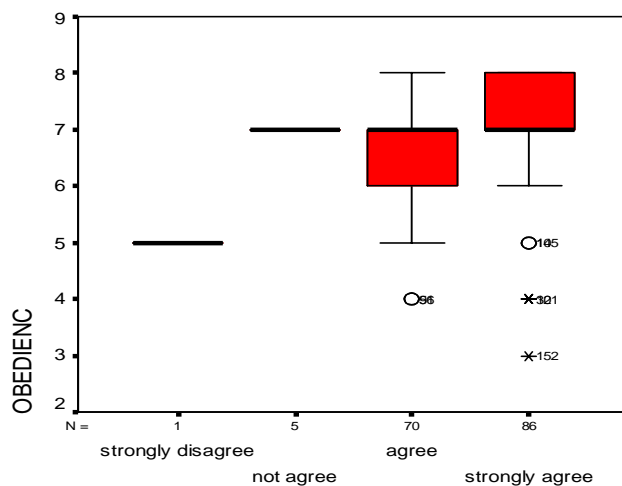
The correlation is very low ($V = 0,3$), which results from the concentration of all answers in the fields agree and strongly agree. In other words, there are not enough variations in the answers. In total 117 respondents (72%) combine in their orientation leadership and discipline.

		Obedience to authorities				Total
		strongly disagree	not agree	agree	strongly agree	
Leadership	strongly disagree	0	0	1	0	1
	not agree	0	0	0	5	5
	agree	1	2	27	40	70
	strongly agree	3	1	17	65	86
Total		4	3	45	110	162

The pattern is similar to the one above. The majority identifies authorities with leaders who have to be respected and followed (149, 92%). Both tables together endorse the assumption of a rather strong authoritarian orientation.

In the following graph, the two questions referring to obedience are combined and their distribution shown following answers on leadership:

(The y axis indicates believe in authority and discipline, the x axis provides data on agreement to strong leadership).



Q7

Not only do we have a very clear connection between a belief in obedience and in leadership, but the more a person assumes that leadership is necessary to solve the problems, the stronger is the inclination towards discipline. Thus, there is a demand for a good and strong leader (the white knight) who forces all to be disciplined. These data indicate that the respondents want to have leaders whom they can obey. Instead of own decision making and self responsibility there is a search for leaders to rely on.

This perspective is also quite strongly expressed when taking the data on world views and conventions.

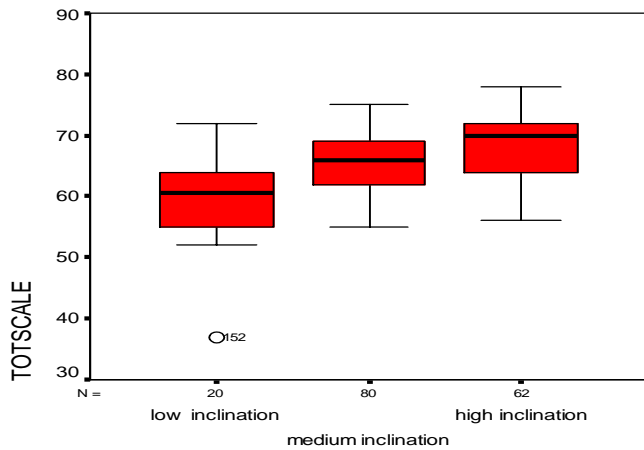
World views, conventions	18%	49%	32%
4. Those without a proper upbringing can not expect to get along with those who have a better education	76	70	16
2. People can be distinguished into the weak and the powerful	89	63	9
21. Who insults us has to be punished	12	107	43
22. Sciences have their reason, but there are many important issues and questions humans will never be able to comprehend	11	105	46
30 Homosexuals should be punished	39	72	48
Solutions	9%	47%	44%
24. When one has problems, it is best not to think about it but have fun and enjoy oneself	17	101	43
15. Sexual abusers of children and women should not only be treated in prison. These persons should publicly be punished by beatings etc.	16	49	96
17. If people would talk less and work more, then life would be better for all	15	63	84
28. If we try hard enough, all problems can be solved	17	84	61
27. Much would improve if criminality is really under control	4	87	70

There is an indicator for a feeling that the help to solve problems will come from outside and others. This connects well with the strong attitude towards religion. World view and religion correlates quite strongly ($r=0,45$). Solutions of problems should come from easy but consequent actions by leaders. One might say as well, a search for persons who are willing to do something for solving problems, instead of long time discussions. Especially these world views do not leave much space for self-responsible decision making.

Violence:

For us the issue of violence, indicated by the statement 21 (Who insults us has to be punished) and 23 (Often there are reasons unknown to us why people become the victim of violence) were relevant for our analysis of the situation in the south. With regards to violence in southern Thailand it has to be kept in mind that more than a third of the violence there can be explained by the general level of violence in Thailand.⁵ As can be expected, those who rank low with regards to violence (defined as answering at least one of the two question in a negative way) rank low on the authority scale, and those scoring highest (strongly agreeing to at least one of the two questions), score highest.

⁵ While in 2005 54 violent crimes per 100,000 people were accounted for in Narathiwat, the average for the east of Thailand also scores relatively high with 18 crimes. Source: UNDP 2007.



VIOLENCE

This result fits the general perspective that among authoritarian orientations control of violence is reduced. Interestingly, there are no differences with regards to violence depending on degree of religious orientations. It is not surprising that violence and belief in strong leadership are closely connected:

		Need for strong leaders				Total
		strongly disagree	not agree	agree	strongly agree	
VIOLENCE	low inclination	1	0	11	8	20
	medium inclination	0	4	40	36	80
	high inclination	0	1	19	42	62
Total		1	5	70	86	162

This allows the conclusion that leaders appeal to those who are less controlling on violent impulses, and thereby, can make use of this potential violence by their followers. Looking at some general variables, gender plays no role with regards to violence. Similarly, the educational level, income or current position does not reduce the inclination towards violence. This means that as long as the general tendency towards an authoritarian orientation prevails, neither improved education, higher salaries etc. might lead to a reduction of violence.

Conclusions:

A strong authoritarian orientation is obvious in Thailand. Especially the orientation towards a courageous leader, who dares to do the necessary things to solve problems, rather than talks about it, is widely shared. These leaders or patrons should be followed, as they provide solutions. Interestingly, against popular belief with regard to the south, religion is important, but this does not mean that religious leaders are preferred. It seems that leadership and religion are indeed two distinct issues.

In general, a conclusive analysis is difficult because the variables do not differ as much as would be good for a statistical analysis. Simply, those who do not share an authoritarian orientation are very few. We have shades of authoritarian orientations rather than different orientations altogether. However, the prevalence of an authoritarian orientation does not endorse the currently popular view among those who put forth semi-authoritarianism, that the people are not yet ready for democracy. Similarly one may then say that the elites (e.g. those

behind the current anti-government demonstrations) are not ready for democracy. But, will there ever be participatory democracy, since democratization by definition reduces elite positions? Democracy can only evolve, when the participation of citizens is institutionalized. Institutionalized participation here means more than to elect politicians, but active engagement. Citizenship not only implies rights, but also the daily duties of political subjects, one of which is to leave the comfortable position of being a political object of elite interests.

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