THE
THAKSINIZATION
OF THAILAND

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THAI RAK THAI WAS HAILED by some observers as a new kind of Thai political party, changing the rules of the game and paving the way for a more policy-based party system that would offer voters genuine electoral alternatives. Other commentators were guilty of underestimating or even ridiculing the ambition and determination of the new party and its leader, Thaksin Shinawatra. Developments since 2001 have made simplistic summaries of the Thai Rak Thai phenomenon impossible, since the party is clearly a substantial and complex force, which has changed Thai politics in numerous respects. But to what extent was Thai Rak Thai a new phenomenon, and how far was it simply a repackaging of earlier political forms? Answering this question involves reviewing the way in which Thai political parties had been analysed and understood before the groundbreaking 2001 general election. Prior to the emergence of the Thai Rak Thai Party in 1999, political parties in Thailand had been broadly viewed through three alternative approaches: political economy approaches, political sociology approaches and political science approaches.

Democracy is a vehicle. We can't drive a Rolls-Royce to a rural village and solve people's problems. A pickup or a good off-road car will do. We just need to think carefully and make the right choices. – Thaksin Shinawatra

POLITICAL ECONOMY APPROACHES

The political economy approach, popularized by writers such as Sungsidh Phiriyarangsan, Pasuk Pongpaichit and Kevin Hewison, emphasized the extent to which the nature of Thai politics was determined by the country's underlying socio-economic realities. In other words, the emphasis was very much on an intimate relationship between political activity and business activity – politics was simply the continuation of business by other means.² Central to any understanding of Thai parties was the idea of political factions: parties were alliances of different factions, brought together not by a common ideology, but rather through shared financial interests, personal ties and opportunism. Factions varied in character – some based on particular regions of the country, others on religious ties (such as the Southern Muslim Wadah group, which migrated from the Democrats to New Aspiration, then later to Thai Rak Thai) – but most were highly pragmatic.³ Factions were typically organized around key individuals who supplied leadership and financial support; these individuals could readily move their faction from one party to another in search of greater opportunities and benefits, thereby destabilizing political parties, causing them regularly to fragment and then reconstruct. Central to parties was the role of power brokers and 'fixers', individuals (almost always men) who worked to bring together coalitions of factions to create parties, and then to create larger coalitions of parties in order to form administrations. The ultimate political fixer of the 1990s was Democrat Party secretary-general Sanan Kachornprasart, who brokered the creation of the 1992–95 and 1997–2000 Democrat-led coalition governments, before himself falling victim to accusations of corruption and being banned from politics for five years.

Where parties and coalitions were brokered by political fixers, typically party secretary-generals with less than respectable public images, there was a necessity for these organizations to be 'fronted' by a more reputable leadership figure. Such was precisely the case during the two Democrat administrations of the 1990s, during
which Chuan Leekpai served as prime minister. A highly regarded
and personally incorruptible lawyer of academic inclinations, Chuan
was a completely different figure from secretary-general Sanan.
Chuan had little day to day control over many aspects of the govern-
ment - Sanan played a crucial role in assigning ministerial port-
folios, for example - but served as a highly plausible public face for
the Democrats. In this way the underlying political economy of the
administration, while widely understood by political insiders, was
concealed from the public through a 'dual structure'. The party leader
acted as prime minister, while the secretary general was the prin-
cipal financier and broker of the deals, including some less than trans-
parent and legitimate deals. A self-declared exception was Chaturon
Chaisang, a former 1970s student leader who served for a time as
secretary-general of New Aspiration, who asked rhetorically 'But
what would people want a secretary-general to have money for? Not
being rich is my strength instead of my weakness'. Perhaps because
of this weakness, Chaturon did not remain in his post for very long.

The reason for wealthy secretary-generals was that the key to
electoral success in Thailand's prevailing political economy was
money politics: party buying of electoral candidates, buying support
from influential figures to facilitate their election, and then directly
buying votes from the electorate. Money politics involved industri-
scale operations, using elaborate networks of vote-cancassers and all
manner of sophisticated ploys. In some places, for example, illegal
lottery sellers were used to dispense funds, and voters were given
'tickets' which they could redeem after the election if the chosen
candidate won. A vast range of merchandising was produced, ranging
from t-shirts to fish-sauce bottles marked with the name and number
of the favoured candidate. Those displaying posters in support of
candidates would be paid 'rents' for the use of their wall or window
space. Accompanying such practices were various modes of violence
and intimidation, ranging from hired thugs loitering near polling
stations, to the actual murder of canvassers who failed to deliver
votes they had promised. By 1995, a serious candidate for election in
the provinces needed to be able to spend at least 20 million baht (at
the time, close to a million US dollars). Under such conditions, it is
unsurprising that mediocre and corrupt individuals were frequently
elected to parliament, producing growing demands for political
reform led by urban-based elites. Since respectable people were
reluctant to involve themselves in dirty and violent election campaigns,
parliament was increasingly populated by those with questionable
qualifications. This reinforced a sense amongst political reformers
that Thailand's parties were simply pragmatic interest groups that
served to badge and credentialize political undesirables. Interestingly,
these were views that Thaksin Shinawatra himself appeared to support
soon after creating Thai Rak Thai, telling the Far Eastern Economic
Review in 1999, 'After the next election you will see a totally different
scene from what you see now. What you see now is the last honey-
moon for corrupt politicians.'

POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY APPROACHES
Political sociology approaches see Thai political parties in terms of
the wider structure of Thai society, which they see as characterized
by the formation of groups and cliques (best rendered in Thai as
phuak), linked to wider social networks through a complex web of
personal contacts and obligations. Earlier approaches saw these
phuak in terms of patron-client relations. More recently, it has been
argued that patron-client relations have become highly commercialized
and divorced from traditional Thai social constructs. These approaches
underly some of the work of Jim Ockey, but are most clear in the
writings of Michael Nelson and Daniel Arghiros. Under the faction-based system, cabinet posts were allocated on
a quota basis, reflecting the size and number of political parties
joining the coalition. Jobs in turn were assigned by parties on the
basis of internal factional considerations: a faction leader who had
delivered, say, 10 MPs to his party, had a claim to a ministerial
position of some kind. The holder of this ministerial position
would then be obliged to repay the faction through recovering some
of the faction's electoral 'investments', normally through some form
of corrupt practice. In other words, there was a direct relationship between the factional basis of party politics and the structural nature of political corruption in the Thai order, a relationship that shared much in common with Japan under the Liberal Democratic Party.\textsuperscript{13}

The net result was that parties themselves were essentially irrelevant. Parties were not associated with formal policy platforms: manifestos were essentially interchangeable, as were so-called ‘government policy statements’ announced with great fanfare following the opening of a new parliament. In the run-up to the July 1995 general election, considerable media attention was paid to comparing the details of the various party manifestos. Yet on the very night of that election a completely opportunistic and patently preassembled seven party coalition emerged to form a government, and their supposed policy differences were thrown unceremoniously to the winds.\textsuperscript{14} Under such circumstances, it did not matter how many members or branches a given party claimed to have, since parties were in no sense accountable to their memberships, but were run entirely on behalf of the leadership and the financial interests underwriting them. This phenomenon of the sham party was most clearly seen in the Samakkhi Tham Party, an ad hoc alliance assembled by supporters of the 1991 coup group. This entirely pragmatic grouping became the largest single party following the March 1992 general election, and was instrumental in making coup leader Suchinda Kraprayoon prime minister – though only, as it turned out, for 48 days. But while Samakkhi Tham was the most blatant example of political opportunism, it is arguable that other parties and governments of the 1980s and 1990s were fundamentally similar in their orientation and outlook. For political sociologists, Thai parties were nothing more than collections of \textit{phuak}, groups of personalized factions.

**POLITICAL SCIENCE APPROACHES**

All this is anathema to the mainstream political scientist, for whom parties are driven essentially by politics and are only secondarily influenced by considerations of business or clientelist ties. Thai political scientists have been very reluctant to accept the views of the political economy school; indeed, this school, largely based within the Political Economy Centre of Chulalongkorn University’s Faculty of Economics, threatens the academic jurisdiction of political scientists over their own sphere of teaching and research. Since the late 1980s, political science as a subject has been in a weak condition in Thailand, as prominent and internationally recognized political scientists have pursued alternative careers.\textsuperscript{15} Local political scientists have consistently argued that Thai parties ought to be comparable with those in other countries (a central plank of Kramol Tongdhamachart’s pamphlet on Thai parties). As early as August 1932, analysts had been suggesting that ideally, Thailand should move towards a two-party system like those of Britain and the United States.\textsuperscript{16} Coalition political systems, though widespread in Western Europe, have been consistently seen as unsuitable for Thailand. Ultimately, this seems to be a matter of status: Thailand ought to aspire to the status of a two party system, which is the ultimate reflection of party politics in a democratic order. It is also necessary that political parties possess two key elements: ideology (closely associated with specific policy platforms, stances and manifesto pledges) and organizational complexity (involving mass membership and a network of branches).

Political scientists such as Kramol Tongdhamachart have served as advisors to numerous Thai parties, notably the United Thai Peoples’ Party (UTPP) in the 1960s, for which Kramol drew up blueprints based on the Taiwanese KMT.\textsuperscript{17} Proposals of this kind reflect a curious mixture of academic expertise and normative idealism: the idea that the KMT was either a desirable or a possible model for a party created by the Thai military in the 1960s can only strike the detached observer as profoundly curious. But underlying this and other proposals (Kramol was also one of the many academics who advised Chavalit Yongchaiyudh during the creation of the New Aspiration Party) lay a pervasive belief that a certain kind of party could be brought into being through a top-down process of organization and management. This mode of party is what the leading Italian political
scientist Angelo Panebianco terms the 'mass bureaucratic party' (after Duverger's 'mass party'), a party that emphasizes formal structures above all else. Its attractions for political scientists, both Thai and non-Thai alike, lie in its complete rejection of the totally informal and personalized connections and networks that underpin the political economy view of parties. The mass bureaucratic party has members all over the country (in a country the size of Thailand, this is taken to mean millions of members), members who represent a significant proportion of voters, and who enable more direct communication between politicians and the electorate. Such a party is disciplined, following clearly defined rules and procedures; the leadership has legitimacy and support derived from party members and MPs.

Elements of the mass bureaucratic party can be seen in various Thai parties. References to such parties are pervasive in Thai political discourse: it is simply not possible for a Thai politician to declare publicly that parties do not really need members or branches. To this extent, the discourse of the mass bureaucratic party is hegemonic in Thailand, despite the fact that no such party has ever existed. The New Aspiration Party, founded in 1990, is a classic example of an attempt to build a mass bureaucratic party: from the outset, the NAP was characterized by elaborate formal structures and claims of a huge membership. Chavalit saw it as emulating Suharto's Golkar, populated by large numbers of ex-bureaucrats and military people. Similarly, Chamlung Srimuang's Palang Dharma Party aspired to create a sophisticated network of regional branches, and placed emphasis on building up a strong membership base. Both parties sought to stake out their own distinctive ideological positions. Though in practice their policy manifestos were rather anodyne, Chavalit's party was characterized by an appeal to national security ideas and conventional approaches to economic development, while Chamlung's was associated in the public imagination with an opposition to corruption and money politics and a strong determination to resist the dictatorial tendencies of the military. Ultimately, however, both parties were too closely linked with the personalities of their founders to pass the test as mass bureaucratic parties: rules and procedures were always subordinated to the concerns of the leadership. James Putzel has argued that developing countries urgently need to promote programmatic political parties, suggesting that the current vogue for 'civil society' pays insufficient attention to the need to strengthen 'political society', and to offer the poor a range of legitimate political alternatives.

**ELECTORAL PROFESSIONAL PARTIES**

In 1997, McCargo argued that the key trend in Thai political parties was neither the continuing centrality of money politics nor the ever-present myth of the 'real' mass bureaucratic party. Rather, the emerging reality was the 'electoral professional party', a new mode of Thai party in which the leadership sought to establish a direct connection with voters through the media and through a variety of marketing techniques. This argument reflects the view that mass membership organizations are in general decline throughout the world – Westerners are increasingly 'bowling alone' – and that political parties typify this trend. Mass membership parties such as the socialist parties of Western Europe emerged through a particular set of historical circumstances, but new parties of this kind are no longer being created, and existing mass parties are gradually transforming themselves into something else. Even where mass membership is still salient, it is not usually the decisive variable underpinning electoral success, which more typically reflects the public images of party leaders and their ability to craft messages that are easily communicated through television and other media. In most developed countries, an ever-contracting segment of the electorate considers itself permanently aligned with a particular political party. Floating voters, swayed by short term 'valence issues', have become increasingly central to electoral outcomes. Membership and branches play a largely subordinate role to party images, profiles and policies espoused by a national leadership. The politics of Britain, the US, most Western European countries and Japan can all be analysed in similar terms.
On the face of it, Thailand is quite different from these examples: whereas in 'developed democracies' political parties formerly played a more important role than they do now, in countries such as Thailand they have never played a crucial role in determining electoral outcomes. Thais like to see themselves as more group-oriented than Westerners, are highly sociable and typically form themselves into competing cliques or factions in all sorts of settings. Thai political parties are likely to be rather different from Western parties: much more factionalized, and more based on personal networks.

The argument here, however, is that the lack of any historical roots for the mass bureaucratic party in Thailand make the electoral professional party an even more important alternative. Electoral professional parties are characterized by the dominance of a small core leadership, who work closely with a group of professional political organizers who include media, marketing and advertising specialists. Polling and focus groups are typically extensively used to help shape party responses to current issues. Such parties make direct appeals to the electorate, without concern for formal party structures such as conferences, which have limited relevance to the 'core business' of the party - winning elections. They have policies and ideas, but no ideology as such: they are the product of a post-ideological age, a world of 'third ways' and pragmatic compromises. Formal membership is of secondary importance, nice if you can get it, but not crucial for mobilizing votes. Professionals who run the party need not be politicians at all - their backgrounds may be in relevant fields such as journalism, advertising or marketing. Such parties are a product, images to be sold to the electorate. The most crucial element for success for such parties is a highly marketable leader, around whom election campaigning is centred. Electoral professional parties travel light: they have little baggage, historical or ideological, to encumber them. They are thus free to adopt those pragmatic policy positions that best serve their purposes in any given election.

Elements of electoral professionalism began to emerge even prior to the creation of Thai Rak Thai. Palang Dharma, especially during its later years, showed a predilection for clever television commercials that proved a precursor of later features of Thai Rak Thai. Similarly, the Democrat Party used cheeky English slogans in Bangkok posters for the September 1992 election, and used good-looking Abhisit Vejjajiva as a poster boy for campaigns in the capital. Baker argues that in the 1990s the Democrats successfully 'reengineered' themselves to reflect the changing nature of Thai society; they brought in technocrats and 'showcased a new generation of young urban professionals who symbolized urban aspirations for modernization'.24 In this way, they were able to build support in Bangkok, as well as strengthening their traditional base in the South. This Southern base was consolidated partly because of the immense personal popularity of Chuan Leekpai in the region. The regional hold that the Democrats achieved in the South was not matched by other parties, despite their best efforts, and there were generally weak links between regions and national level electoral politics.25

But the key to Democrat success in dominating Thai politics for most of the 1990s lay in the combination of Southern strength and 'electoral professional' attempts to appeal to a Bangkok electorate.

The emergence of Thai Rak Thai, however, arguably saw the first serious contender for the title of electoral professional party set out its stall in Thailand. The party contained most of the elements of the electoral professional party: it was marketing-led, featured a focus on leadership, had various policies but no ideology, and a core group of professionals underpinned the Party's operations. In order to assess and review this claim, various features of Thai Rak Thai will be reviewed here: the role of MPs and factions; members and branches; policies and programmes; the role of advisors and technocrats; marketing and electoral campaigning, local elections, the parliamentary party and the role of the party leader.

**ROLE OF MPS AND FACTIONS**

In traditional Thai parties, gathering together political factions was the primary means by which a viable electoral machine could be
assembled: parties competed to woo personalized factions under their umbrellas, creating a transfer market in electable candidates, which operated both individually and in blocs. This approach was part of Thai Rak Thai’s strategy; by September 2000, it was reported that Thai Rak Thai had already recruited as many as 100 incumbent MPs.26 *Prajakan* Weekly referred to Thai Rak Thai as ‘phak dut’, the sucking party, because of its penchant for vacuuming up prospective winning candidates.27 But Thaksin did not confine himself to wooing existing or former MPs; many new figures were recruited to stand as Thai Rak Thai candidates, many of them provincial councillors who had a ready-made local support base.28 While former local politicians could be presented to the voting public as ‘new faces’ in parliamentary terms, they were hardly idealistic advocates of new thinking and policy initiatives; most were seasoned log-rollers and pork barrelers, who had typically made their money in the contracting business.

Nevertheless, Thai Rak Thai sought to project itself as a new kind of party, stressing the extent to which its MPs had emerged from non-traditional sources. The change to a party list system was important in this respect: because only those parties securing more than 5 per cent of the popular vote were entitled to any party list seats, senior figures running on the party lists of small parties found themselves wiped out. As Baker notes, this was most clearly illustrated by the humiliation of the Asawathep family in Samut Prakan.29 As intended by the constitution drafters, this change worked in favour of larger parties, weakening party proliferation.

It could be argued, however, that Thai Rak Thai is more electoral than professional. Factions still persist and are highly salient. This continuing reality forms the basis of Thai Rak Thai’s ‘grand coalition’ strategy.30 Money politics still plays a huge role in Thai Rak Thai’s election victories, and alliances with ‘rural network’ politicians remain crucial.31 One way of explaining this paradox would be to argue that Thai Rak Thai is actually two parties in one, adopting a new form of ‘dual structure’: the electoral professional party plays in Bangkok, while the rural network party operates in the countryside.32 This may be true to some extent, but it also belies the complexity of the situation. Baker suggests that Thai Rak Thai MPs comprised two similar-sized groups: ‘first time MPs, with an average age in their late 30s; and those who had defected from other parties, whose average age was in the mid 50s.33 It would be tempting to see the first group as the ‘Thaksin MPs’, and the second group as the warhorses with whom Thaksin had been obliged to make a tactical alliance. The implication here is that over time, traditional electoral politicians would give way to a new generation of professional politicians. According to this argument, Thaksin is a technocrat and a reformer who privately despises old-style politicians such as kingmaker Sanoh Tientong, who made and broke the Banharn and Chavalit governments and serves as his chief political advisor. This is an argument which Thaksin presents to certain audiences; shortly before the 2001 general election, he told interviewers:

> We have 75 per cent new people, 25 per cent old-face politicians. During the transition, there is no way you can take only all brand new. This is not really a totally new era, it’s the transition to a new era. So when it’s a transition you need the experience of the old and the ideas of the new people. We can blend them to work together.34

This statement echoed an interview he gave immediately after the creation of Thai Rak Thai, in which he said that the ratio of new to old politicians in Thai Rak Thai should be 75:25, generating the view that the final proportions would be a benchmark to determine how far Thai Rak Thai was a new alternative.35 In practice, however, the distinction was not so clear-cut, since many of the younger MPs elected in 2001 enjoyed close patronage or even familial relations with the more senior group. Members of the old political groupings did take on major cabinet roles, though it is significant that the main economic portfolios were given to Thaksin’s close associates and senior people from the business community, while areas such as education and health were given mainly to reformers and civil society activists.36 It could well be argued that Thaksin was extremely comfortable with old-style politicians who did not challenge his authority, and had trouble trusting technocrats and reformers who
showed signs of resisting his attempts to interfere in the working of their ministries.

What was the factional structure of Thai Rak Thai? The party had two large competing factions: Snoh Thienthong’s Wang Namyen faction, and the northern faction led by Thaksin’s sister, Yaowapha Wongsaawat. Wang Namyen was believed to have expanded from around 40 MPs at the time of the election to around 65, mainly comprising central and Northeastern representatives.37 Snoh was something of a mixed blessing for Thaksin, since his problematic political image made him unsuited to cabinet office. Designated the prime minister’s ‘chief political advisor’, Snoh proved a thorn in Thaksin’s side, impossibly claiming to control the majority of votes in parliament and seeking to ensure that the prime minister could not challenge the vested interests of his supporters.38

Yaowapha was widely seen as a force to counterbalance Snoh’s influence: in July 2001, members of her faction occupied 14 government positions, compared with 13 members of Snoh’s faction.39 She gained much of her following through serving as Thai Rak Thai’s northern campaign manager, playing a key role in candidate selection in the northern provinces. As Crispin observed ‘Although new to the game, Yaowapha seems to have already mastered the nuances of entourage politics.’40 Yaowapha was believed to have at least 60 MPs in her faction, mainly from northern provinces, and was instrumental in having Suriya Jungrungreungkit made secretary-general of Thai Rak Thai. She chaired the House Industry Committee and sat on several other key committees, as well as playing a key role in the ‘one tambon, one product’ programme, a local development initiative which helped firm up her power base. OTOP was an important project for the government in terms of creating new networks of local support.41 Yaowapha is very close to her brother: when Thaksin briefly doubled up as education minister in 2001, she acted as his secretary. At the same time, she had substantial business interests related to some Shinawatra telecommunications companies.42

Other elements in the party included Purachai Piumsombun and his supporters, and a small group of reform-minded academic MPs – known as the ‘twenty doctors’, on account of their holding PhDs – who wanted to restructure the party and curtail Snoh’s influence. The twenty doctors, who were led by Rawang Netpokaew, quickly met with a strong reaction from Snoh, adopting a lower profile when he accused them of a holier-than-thou attitude and suggested they leave the party if they were over-qualified for their jobs.43 There were also tensions between Snoh and some former NAP MPs, whom he had publicly criticized as ‘Nazis’: the overall effect of the merger between NAP and Thai Rak Thai was to reduce Snoh’s influence, since Thaksin now relied less on his support.44 A further element in Thai Rak Thai, the group of former student and social activists such as Chaturon Chaisang and Sutham Saengpratham, was not a unified force and appeared to become progressively marginalized as Thaksin’s term went on. While factionalism was in one sense the feature of a weak and disunited political party, the factionalism of Thai Rak Thai allowed the leadership to engage in ‘divide and rule’ tactics: when the coalition controlled over 300 seats, even a sizeable faction with over 60 MPs counted for relatively little.

Thaksin’s majority in 2001 was so large that he had no real need to bring the old-style Chart Thai and New Aspiration parties into his government: had he favoured technocratic reformist professionalism over simple parliamentary arithmetic, surely he would not have done so. He initially won 248 of parliament’s 500 seats, and could even have established a single-party government had he wished (especially once he had absorbed the small Seritham Party, with 14 seats). Nor did he really need to incorporate New Aspiration into Thai Rak Thai at the beginning of 2002. Indeed, it can be argued that old-style politicians were useful to Thaksin in counterbalancing the other forces in his government, allowing him more scope to adjudicate and to get his way on all manner of crucial issues. Thaksin did more than tolerate these politicians: he actively wooed them and welcomed them into his own party. He also worked hard to build alliances with sympathetic figures in the supposedly non-
partisan Senate. As Chang Noi pointed out, this form of incorporationist political control was an expensive business — paying Thai Rak Thai MPs a monthly allowance of 200,000 baht per month was costing 0.72 billion baht per annum, and other party expenses probably meant that a budget of a billion baht a year was needed. Such an expensive policy was clearly part of a systematic strategy.

A long analysis of Thaksin's first year in office homed in on the issues facing Thai Rak Thai. Whereas previous Thai governments had been characterized by unstable coalition politics and the lack of a clear policy direction, this government was quite different. Yet despite the 325 seats commanded by Thaksin and his allies, the political condition of the government still did not satisfy prime minister Thaksin, because any movement of coalition government partners would still be able to rock the ship of state. Jim Ockey has suggested that Thaksin's desire to build a grand coalition — thereby marginalizing the role of faction leaders — is the most innovative feature of Thai Rak Thai. At the same time, he cautions that 'in the long term, a grand coalition is less stable than a minimum winning coalition': this is a political strategy replete with risk. By trying to bring the elements of the grand coalition inside his own party, Thaksin sought to manage and control that risk as best he could. He was helped in this by the 1997 constitutional changes which made party-hopping extremely difficult, so strengthening the hand of an incumbent prime minister.

Indeed, Thaksin was reported to have told Thai expatriates in Los Angeles that Thailand was moving towards a two party system: but whereas in the USA power alternated between two parties, in Thailand Thai Rak Thai would retain a monopoly of power, opposed by a permanently isolated Democrat Party. He suggested that after the general election, Thai Rak Thai would form a single party government, increasing from his current level of 294 of the 364 coalition seats in the 500 member house. Clearly, this goal would be achieved partly through the cooption of MPs from other parties into Thai Rak Thai, replicating the strategy adopted both prior to the 2001 election, and indeed since the election had taken place. Another element would involve increasing Thai Rak Thai's share of the 100 party list seats. By this point, Thai Rak Thai was claiming 15 million members. Elsewhere he declared that Thai Rak Thai hoped to gain 400 seats after the next election. Thepchai Yong argued that Thaksin was willing to 'roll back the spirit of political reform in order to remain in office', replacing checks and balances with an overriding preference for political stability. The party held a major gathering to begin planning for the election campaign as early as August 2003, targeting 130 of the total 138 seats in the Northeast, and 400 overall. Deputy party leader Thammarak Isarankura urged party activists not to attack politicians from coalition partners Chart Thai and Chart Pattana, given that either party might yet merge with Thai Rak Thai. This meeting was significant for the presence of Thaksin's wife Pojaman, who said nothing but was widely credited with exerting behind-the-scenes influence over the management of both party and government.

Chai-Anan Samudavanija, speaking at a seminar on the thirtieth anniversary of the 1973 student uprising, suggested that 'politics has taken a turn in favour of strong leadership personalities, whereas political parties as an institution will be less important in winning upcoming votes'. He went on to predict that the other parties would be left as nothing more than regional interest groupings if Thai Rak Thai won 400 seats in the 2005 general election. MPs were being bypassed under the Thai Rak Thai dominated system, which allowed the government's programmes to reach voters directly rather than via local mediation, and in future party policies would be more important; small groups of MPs would no longer be able to bargain for a ministerial post in return for supporting an administration.

Thai Rak Thai's factions had a variety of origins and orientations, including regional groupings (Yaowapha) and ideological elements (the former leftists). Thaksin himself sought to argue that a generation of new MPs was displacing older, more traditional politicians, but the reality was rather more complex. Thaksin and his party represented a synthesis of the old and the new, and while the organization of
Thai Rak Thai had numerous electoral professional features, the parliamentary party was rather more electoral than professional.

MEMBERS AND BRANCHES

Thai Rak Thai retains an attachment to ideas of a mass bureaucratic party in terms of branches and membership, partly because no Thai politician dares to challenge this mythology. Baker notes the party’s efforts to create a network of local branches and its claim to have enrolled 8 million members by the end of 2000. Despite party claims that creating a membership base allowed Thai Rak Thai to bypass traditional patronage politics, Nelson is sceptical. Arguably these moves were in no way central to the party’s success, which hinged on the image of the leader, the electoral platform, the mobilization of old-style canvasser networks and the massive use of money to buy both candidates and votes. Nelson also notes that securing membership numbers involved paying applicants, either in kind or in straight cash: ‘I had never before seen so many people wearing t-shirts, jackets, and aprons sporting a party’s name and logo.’ Apart from the public relations value of claiming large numbers of members, there were practical benefits to establishing a sizeable membership base, since political parties received state funding from the Election Commission (EC) determined partly by their membership levels and by the number of branches they maintained. These stipulations reflected the way in which the 1997 constitution had sought to create structural incentives for the emergence of mass bureaucratic parties.

Numbers of party members were an important means by which EC grants were allocated. In 2003, Thai Rak Thai had 10.86 million members, 2.33 million of whom were found by the EC also to be members of other political parties. In other words, for all the talk of 15 million members, Thai Rak Thai had only 8.5 million ‘real’ members in 2003, the same order of membership as the party had claimed before the 2001 general election. Accessed in May 2004, the party website claimed 13 million members. According to the EC, the Democrats had 3.82 million members, 1.37 million of whom were members of other parties: Chart Pattana had 3.7 million, 1.474 million of whom were ‘dual’ members. Thai Rak Thai received Bt 103.54 million from the EC in 2003, while the Democrats received Bt 54.4 million, Chart Thai Bt 17.4 million and Chart Pattana Bt 18.9 million.

In its first five years of existence, the EC paid out Bt 940 million to political parties, but was unable to account for exactly how the money was used: more than half of all 1,464 party branches in the country did not meet requirements, many being used as houses or shops. The EC was in the process of changing regulations so that rents and utility charges for such branches would no longer be covered by grants. The only activities supported would be those activities leading to political development such as providing knowledge on political issues, holding seminars or admitting new party members. Nation reporters found clear evidence of abuses. The Khonkhopbondee Party, which had no MPs, purported to have 218 branches nationwide, but reporters were unable to contact any party officials at all. However, the changed rules would clearly have a major impact on the Democrat Party, which maintained a very large, number of longstanding branches —152 in 1993, and around 192 in 2003—and could be construed as politically motivated.

Partly because of Thai Rak Thai’s dominance over the state and the media, the Democrats sought to revive their rather neglected network of branches after Banyat Bantadtan took over the leadership in April 2003. Acknowledging that branches had enjoyed little importance outside election times, Banyat promised to use the network to try and generate renewed support for the party. Prasarn Niyomsap, a Kanchanaburi branch director, claimed that government officials in the provinces were shunning their attempts to maintain contact: ‘Those officials are scared that political clout will be wielded to harm their families’, Prasarn said, adding that they preferred him to act on their behalf as an ordinary citizen rather than a representative of the opposition. Prasarn said his branch had published copies of newsletters promoting the party’s
activities and cautioning people against the government’s populist policies. But he said it had not proven highly effective, because people were inevitably lured to the government’s big spending ways.

The message here was that even for the Democrat Party – with a far better-developed system of branches than Thai Rak Thai – membership structures were a second order priority, a fallback plan when other sources of voter mobilization proved unavailable. Thai Rak Thai’s highly centralized structure, and overwhelming emphasis on the image of the party leader, meant that branches had little real function, and that processes of consultation were highly superficial. In an editorial, *The Nation* argued that Thai Rak Thai’s February 2004 annual convention would reflect the party’s leadership-driven approach:

Input from party members is supposed to filter through to the party’s top echelon, which then gives shape to ideas through policy formulation, provides effective leadership to translate policies into actions and exercises communicative skills to inspire the masses.

In reality, however, Thai Rak Thai had a top-down corporate culture that did not respect democracy ‘nor a tradition of tolerating dissenting voices’. Nelson asserts that the party has failed to create the branch networks and organizational structures to allow members to participate in decision-making, and asks rhetorically:

Will the members have any meaningful part in the party’s internal political decision-making when they have probably been considered as merely a tool for promoting a leadership-oriented political model in which party members and voters entrust a patron-style leader with their welfare and refrain from interfering in ‘his business’?  

Pasuk and Baker have similarly argued that Thai Rak Thai’s populist polices were part of a broader agenda, dedicated to reordering the political system so as to create ‘a powerful executive and a centralized party supported by business firms’, and also to curb civil society as part of an authoritarian programme to create greater social order. To borrow Panebianco’s terms, the creation of a structure of party branches with local memberships was part of a party policy of ‘territorial penetration’ underpinned by the financial incentives of Election Commission funding. They were not an example of what he calls ‘territorial diffusion’, a natural spread of voluntary activity in support of the party. Thai Rak Thai engaged in a membership drive primarily for financial and presentational reasons, paying lip service to mass bureaucratic ideas of the political party. Fundamentally, however, Thai Rak Thai’s attitude to membership was that of an electoral professional party, in which all activity is subordinated to the creation of a centralized campaign machine.

**POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES**

The electoral success of Thai Rak Thai in 2001 was closely associated with the party’s so-called ‘populist policies’, especially the proposals for a farmer’s debt moratorium, a million baht development fund for every village and a 30-baht healthcare programme. Many observers, including prominent columnists in *Matichon* and *Krungthep Thrairat*, credited them with a crucial role in the Thaksin landslide. Political scientist Sukhum Naulsakul declared that this illustrated the public’s demand for a new mode of politics: ‘People vote for the big picture and principles instead of for individuals like they used to’. Even Thepchai Yong – the Nation group editor who quit his post as news director of iTV when Thaksin took over the station – argued that, ‘For the first time, people voted with judgement… people went out there to cast votes believing in the platform of a political party. This is unprecedented, no matter how populist you may say Thaksin’s policies may be.’ Arguably, this was the beginning of a political landscape in which policies could gain the upper hand over traditional money and patronage politics, thereby vindicating the post-1997 political reform process.
Were Thai Rak Thai’s ‘populist’ programmes actually policy initiatives, or simply alternative means of vote-buying or gaining attention? Analysts were divided, but before the election some financial experts argued that measures such as relieving farmers debts and providing village development funds were not really workable. IDEAglobal.com described the moves as ‘simply old-style politics from a party that claims to be ushering in a new order’.68 Kenneth Ng, head of research at ING Barings, was even sceptical that a change in the ruling party would see any shift in economic policy: ‘we believe a change in government is unlikely to result in a significant change in current reform measures, although perhaps they will be implemented with a little less enthusiasm’. Some analysts saw a fundamental difference between the Democrats and Thai Rak Thai in terms of their attitudes to globalization and free trade. Pasuk argued that the Democrats were more free market oriented, reflecting their strengths in Bangkok and the South, while Thai Rak Thai’s more sceptical view of globalization mirrored the position of farmers in the North and Northeast of the country.69 Dr Thanavath Ponvichia suggested that while Thai Rak Thai was also market oriented, ‘Many initiatives, whether farm debt suspension of Internet development, will be led by the government’. In other words, there was a top-down, statist character to Thai Rak Thai’s thinking and rhetoric – this was a party led by a business leader whose career had been built on working closely with the state.

Another populist policy was the creation of the ‘People’s Bank’, or bank for the poor, a bank to make business development fund loans at low interest, for amounts of no more than 15,000 baht.70 Speaking to a gathering of Asian political parties in November 2002, Thaksin declared that competition between parties should be based on ‘winning the hearts and minds of the people through their actions’, rather than on the basis of ideological differences. Given that parties had never competed in Thailand over ideological differences, this was not a particularly surprising assertion. Michael Nelson suggests that these ‘populist policies’ actually offered little concrete benefit to the ordinary voter, and viewed them as a means of creating a patron-client relationship between the party leader and the electorate.71

But what was the core of Thai Rak Thai’s policy platform? For all the talk of populist policies and social programmes, there was little evidence of these from a quick search of the Thai Rak Thai website, www.thairakthai.or.th, which contained a lot of outdated press releases and non-functioning links.72 An English language book comprising 96 pages of information on the party, apparently released around the time of APEC in October 2003, contained a rather different discussion of the party’s policy priorities than the vague platitudes to be found on the website. The first page of the book declared that the party’s principal policy platform was based on three wars: the war on poverty, war on drugs and war on corruption.73 This alarming emphasis on all-out warfare gave way to a more familiar list of five ‘new’ policies designed to solve economic hardships and create opportunities for the common man: the 30-baht healthcare scheme, three year suspension of farmers’ debt, million baht village development fund, SME support and the creation of the Thai Asset Management Corporation. It was unclear exactly how this last initiative was likely to benefit the common man.

The book went on to offer three alternative formulations of party policy: a 12-page section entitled ‘Nation building through 11 national agendas’; 22 pages devoted to the three wars (poverty, corruption and drugs); and then 36 pages headed ‘Policy of the government’, an unofficial translation of the policy statement Thaksin had presented to the Thai parliament on 26 February 2001, shortly after taking office. There were numerous overlaps, contradictions and inconsistencies between the three main sections of the book, none of which corresponded to the summaries of party policy given on the website. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Thai Rak Thai was not terribly clear about its policy positions, and in this respect did not differ greatly from other past or present Thai political parties. The ‘populist policies’ sounded clearer and more attractive than they were in reality, perhaps because Thaksin and those around him were frequently changing their minds about the best policy options and directions.

In November 2003, Thaksin announced a new plank of his populist policies, a promise to eradicate poverty within six years – a
pledge which attracted some criticism as an unrealistic, top-down initiative. Rather than focusing on those living below a certain income level, the anti-poverty programme emphasized seven key groups — landless farmers, the homeless, needy students, people heading for bankruptcy, labourers who have been victimized by overseas job scams, low-income earners who lack housing, and those engaged in the underground economy. These ideas were criticized for generating publicity and appealing to troublesome sectors of society rather than concentrating on sectors suffering from the greatest real deprivation. However, government plans to register poor people all over the country so that benefits could be targeted directly towards them offered Thai Rak Thai a means of building up a new support base centred on the estimated 8.2 million people concerned. In mid-2004, Thaksin announced a follow-up programme to inject a further round of village development funds, proposals widely criticized as an electoral ploy.

Thai Rak Thai’s policy platform created a new challenge for the opposition Democrats, who had previously traded on their overall image as a long-established party rather than a specific policy programme. Chumpol Sunghong, a Democrat Party branch director in Chaiyaphum, argued that people were now voting mainly according to policies and were rejecting the old style of patronage politics. Somkit Pongpiboon of Rajabhat Institute Nakhon Ratchasima argued that Thai Rak Thai policies now led local people to expect help from the central government rather than local officials and politicians. Such views put pressure on the opposition party to counter with populist policies of its own. Abhisit Vejjajiva, who was defeated for the Democrat Party leadership in April 2003, argued that the party needed to ‘get together to count down for the future’, stressing that ‘to win voters we need to come up with a policy at a time and not rush all of them out at once’. Clear-cut and effective policies were needed. However, the new Democrat leader Banyat Bantadtan declared that his party would not engage in ‘destructive ways’ to compete with the populist policies of Thai Rak Thai. ‘We will not promise that we will give each village 8t 2 million or launch a Bt 15-per-visit health-care scheme to compete with them’. He insisted that the party would not create quick-fix projects that lacked popular participation. However, less than a year later the Democrats were producing policy proposals that sounded remarkably like attempts to upstage Thai Rak Thai: at the Democrat Party conference in April 2004, Banyat announced plans to reduce tuition fees at state universities by 50 per cent, to forgive farmers’ debt, to provide farmers with 5000 baht a month to help them improve their productivity, to pay 1,000 baht a month to people over 60 who did not receive a government pension and to provide free healthcare for those in this category.

However, Sombat Thamrongthanyawong, a political scientist at NIDA, argued that attempts by Thai Rak Thai and the Democrats to claim that people now voted on the basis of policies were untrue: the basis of politics remained local patronage, and all Thai Rak Thai had done was move patronage from local society to the national level. Thai Rak Thai voters backed the party simply to gain benefits from populist policies, something unrelated to faith or loyalty. The cynical view was that Thaksin’s policy promises were hollow, a vote-winning package with little to do with the core concerns of the Thai Rak Thai administration. By extension, this was not really an electoral professional party, and the rules of the Thai political game had been slightly modified rather than fundamentally changed by the emphasis on policies which had characterized the Thai Rak Thai campaign for the 2001 general elections. A more positive view is that by voting for attractive party policies, Thai voters were behaving as rational actors, and that Thai Rak Thai’s election platform had helped raise the quality of the Thai political process.

ADVISORS AND TECHNOCRATS

One characteristic of the electoral professional party is its reliance on a relatively small group of technocrats to guide policy and presentational issues. Thailand experienced an analogous idea during the Chatichai government of 1988–91. Chatichai had employed his
own team of academics as advisors, referred to as the Ban Phitsanulok group because of their location in the official residence of the prime minister, close to Government House. Thaksin's version was different: while Ban Phitsanulok was concerned with government policy and not the activities of the ruling Chart Thai Party, Thai Rak Thai advisors played a combined role in strategic thinking for both party and government. At the core of Thaksin's advisory group was Pansak Vinyaratn, former head of the Ban Phitsanulok team, who had worked closely with rival media magnate Sondhi Limthongkul to establish the short-lived newspaper Asia Times. Pansak, co-founder of Thai Rak Thai, was closely associated with Thaksin's rise to power.

Described by Sурanee Vejajiva as 'an ideas man ... the intellectual firepower behind the prime minister's business acumen that makes our government work', Pansak was believed to be Thaksin's chief spin doctor and English speech writer. Given to jumping from one topic to another, Pansak's main themes were how Thailand fitted into the world economy, and the importance of fostering SMEs. Highly critical of the Washington consensus, he argued that Thailand should position itself as the 'Italy of the East', that Western capitalism was largely driven by nationalism, and that the USA and Japan were examples of 'failed economies'. His views on nationalism as the engine of capitalism were apparently influenced by American academic Liah Greenfeld's book, The Spirit of Capitalism: Nationalism and Economic Growth, to which he and Thaksin made various references. Pansak argued that Thailand should move away from a free-market economy towards what Crispin terms 'more welfare-oriented economics, a departure aimed at strengthening the country's grassroots economy, while providing a buffer against the global one'.

Speaking at the Central Party School of the Chinese Communist Party in 2002, Pansak declared:

I would like to emphasize that we in Asia should not replicate the West in our economic model. This does not mean we should reject historical and scientific facts, but rather we should provide alternative models of development, alternative and

appropriate time frames to achieve our objectives. The world will be richer if there is more than one model of development. 

Briefly jailed after October 1976 because of his critical journalism, Pansak embraced a curious mixture of socialist ideas and capitalist leanings. He was in his element playing behind-the-scenes roles in the courts of rich and powerful men with large egos, serving as head of Chatchai's Ban Phitsanulok team from 1988 to 1991, then as editor-in-chief of Sondhi's grandiose and ill-fated Asia Times newspaper in the mid-1990s, a post which he held concurrently with the editorship of the monthly English-language Manager magazine. At Asia Times, he began to advocate the peculiarly Sondhian mixture of globalization and Asian values which he later transmuted into a kind of pseudo-ideology for Thai Rak Thai. As Sondhi argued at the newspaper's launch:

Asia Times is the first Asian owned, Asian regional business newspaper. This is the first time that Asians can hear the voices of other Asians. The launch of Asia Times demonstrates the first time Asians are breaking the western media monopoly in Asia.

Asian nationalism is in some ways an ironic stance for a Western-educated intellectual said to write better in English than in Thai. Described as 'known for creativity as well as extreme arrogance', Pansak was also renowned for his proclivity for swearing. Along with Prommin Lertsuridej (who later became finance minister) and Padung Limcharoenrat, he formed the 'gang of three', close aides who shielded Thaksin from criticism and provided a buffer for his day-to-day activities. Pansak was widely credited with having coined the election slogan 'Think new, act new', and with promoting the government populist policy programmes. He was unpopular with many cabinet members, however, who saw him as undermining the prime minister's position by restricting policy debate, and encouraging him to overreact to press criticism.
Pana Janviroj argued that Thai Rak Thai's top strategists, led by Somkid and Pansak, had introduced some new thinking, stressing that Thailand did not accept the economic dictates of the Anglo-Saxon world, and that unchecked market forces could undermine Thailand's global competitiveness. Instead, in conjunction with the NESDB, they advocated a plan known as 'Thailand's Dream', based around seven aspirations:

Being a country which thrives on growth with stability through small and medium-sized enterprises; is an active international player; is a world leader in niche markets; is an innovative nation with its own wisdom and learning base; is an entrepreneurial society; is a nation of cultural pride but with a global sense; and is a land of decent living standards and environment.

These ideas were opposed by sceptical traditionalists, who themselves 'are loathed by the Thai Rak Thai elite, who see them as unadventurous and, perhaps wrongly, as servants of an Anglo-Saxon-dominated world'. Thai Rak Thai's advisors sought to stake out a distinctive intellectual territory which formed the basis of government policy, a territory in which Pansak played a central role.

Thaksin's advisory team also worked with foreign consultants and was believed to be the first Thai political party to use Westerners to assist with its electoral strategy. They also used foreign advisors as public relations strategists, particularly in dealing with the foreign press, whose questions Thaksin sometimes detested. Michael Nelson has described a personal encounter with some of these Western consultants:

Shortly after TRT was registered, I had a talk with a Briton and an American in my office at the Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University. They wanted to know how the Thai election system worked and what I thought of Thaksin. Money did not really matter to them, they told me, and handed me 20,000 baht in cash for about two hours of intensive conversation. When I asked them if they were working for a political party, one of them answered, 'Not yet. We are collecting data and then may offer our services.'

He added that when he checked the website of their organization, he could not find out who was behind it; there were no names given. Nelson goes on to describe how not long afterwards, there were press stories saying that a well-funded foreign 'NGO' was hiring Thai academics to conduct political research.

A professor at the above-mentioned faculty was hired, and he recruited scores of research assistants to collect data in every district in Thailand. (One may recall that TRT takes pride in having done 'in-depth' research on and in every Thai district to get to know in detail the socio-economic situation of people in the countryside).

The foreign 'NGO' turned out to be an international consultancy organization, which closed its office and went to ground after receiving unwelcome press coverage. Nelson actually suggests that employing foreigners to help a political party gain electoral advantage may be illegal under Thai law. Interestingly, however, it illustrated the party's love-hate relationship with the outside world - 'loving Thais', but buying in Western expertise where this proved useful.

Whereas under Chatichai the advisory team comprised only seven core members, the Thaksin team had 40 or 50 and was able to conduct performance checks on all policies approved by the cabinet. Two advisory teams were created, one at Ban Phitsanulok and another based at Ban Manaangkhali. Pansak was said to have chaired personal weekly macroeconomic meetings with key policy advisors, meetings which were not attended by finance minister Somkid Jatusripitak. Asked about rumours that he and Pansak were at loggerheads, Somkid dismissed them as 'virtually groundless' - a less than convincing denial.

Somkid was in fact one of Pansak's main rivals in Thaksin's court, described by Achara Deboonne of The Nation as 'one of the chief architects of Thai Rak Thai's landslide election victory'. Somkid was
the natural choice to implement the party’s ‘contractual socialist policy’, since he had helped develop this ‘New Deal’, which aimed to recreate the domestic economy through support of rural enterprises and small- and medium-scale companies. Somkid, who holds a doctorate in marketing and management from Northwestern University, was widely credited with overseeing the village-level surveys that helped generate the ideas for the 30-baht healthcare programme, the farmers’ debt moratorium and the Village development fund. Nelson, however, suggests that much of the detailed oversight was done by an international consultancy company. Somkid credited the American marketing guru Philip Kotler—with whom he had co-authored two books—as a crucial influence on his thinking.

Another key advisor on these policies was Prapat Panyachatraksa, a former student leader from the 1970s, who had started a successful organic orange farm in Lampang. In 1999, he had faxed Thaksin a policy statement that inspired part of the Thai Rak Thai programme, and was rewarded with the post of deputy agriculture minister when the party took office. Another former activist was Prommin Lertsuride, who served first as Thaksin’s secretary, then in October 2002 assumed the role of deputy premier overseeing economic affairs. The Nation described him as ‘the shadow, if not the alter ego, of the prime minister’. Prommin had spent four years fighting with the CPT in the jungle after 6 October 1976. While the Chuan government had worked closely with the bureaucracy to suppress grassroots protest and dissent, Thai Rak Thai sought to enlist support from the popular sector. However, the warm relations Thaksin enjoyed with the NGO community in his early days as premier did not endure. As prominent activist Pibhop Dhongchid declared in October 2001:

We thought this government would make a difference as it has under its wings quite a number of former October 14 activists. We did not have blind faith in those former activists, but we did expect them to convince the government to choose the right solution for poor people . . . . But we have found out that we were too optimistic.

He added that he believed the former leftists in the government were likely to lose influence to more conservative advisors. By March 2002, northern farmers were once again protesting outside Government House. Nevertheless, Thaksin continued to employ the rhetoric of social inclusion, even quoting from Rousseau’s Social Contract in a November 2002 speech to a gathering of Asian political parties. Clearly, Thaksin did not write this speech himself, and it tells us little about his real political attitudes.

Thai Rak Thai did emulate the electoral professional model in its use of a small group of ‘ideas men’ working closely with the party leader as political advisors. To a significant degree, these were different from the political advisors of earlier parties and governments—a mixture of technocrats, hangers-on and tame academics. The Thai Rak Thai administration was essentially run by the prime minister in conjunction with a small team of trusted advisors, who were closely involved in both the formulation and presentation of policy. These advisors helped empower the party leadership and the office of prime minister, at the expense of the faction bosses and cabinet ministers who had typically played central roles in previous governments. They helped to professionalize the decision-making process, insulating Thaksin from other political and social forces ranging from parliament to the electorate.

MARKETING AND ELECTORAL CAMPAIGNING

One of the distinctive characteristics of the Thai Rak Thai Party was its strong emphasis on polling, marketing and modern, business-style approaches to electoral campaigning. Yet for all this talk of sophisticated marketing campaigns, the continuing salience of traditional methods of electioneering was very evident in all parties, especially in the provinces: vote-buying, electoral manipulation with the connivance of government officials, mobilization of traditional patronage networks and straightforward violence and intimidation, continued to be major features of the 2001 election; numerous Thai Rak Thai candidates were ‘yellow carded’ by the Election Com-
mission and forced to engage in electoral re-runs. Whether or not marketing activities and policy pledges contributed more than marginally to the final election outcome is highly debatable.

Between elections Thai Rak Thai was engaged in a continuing, if lower-key, marketing drive. Political marketing differs from the marketing of consumer products and services, since 'customers' of political services only make significant 'purchases' at election times, which may be years apart. Thai Rak Thai sought to devise ways of keeping supporters engaged with their 'product' between elections. This involved reaching out to a wide range of social groups and devising programmes aimed at instilling loyalty to the party brand. These included the so-called 'Youth Councils', involving miniature political forums for hundreds of primary, secondary and university students each year. Participants had the option of doing voluntary work for Thai Rak Thai or writing for Krati Khon (cream of the crop), a party publication sent out to schools all over the country every two months. These activities aimed to engage young people with party activities, as well as parents and teachers. Other community activities also involved older people in training and brainstorming programmes: it was estimated that over 100,000 people took part in various Thai Rak Thai programmes in 2002. These people were given the chance to volunteer to train as party activists or volunteer canvassers. As The Nation put it: 'When you sell mobile phones, you have to make sure that kids get cool applications while adults, who may not be totally happy with your brand, have lesser alternatives and your rivals are not allowed to grow.'

Suthichai Yoon described Thai Rak Thai strategy for the forthcoming 2005 elections as one of 'shock and awe', based on a target of 20 million votes compared with the 12 million the party gained in 2001. 20 million votes would ensure Thai Rak Thai 70 party list seats; combined with 340 of the 400 constituency seats, this would give the party 410 seats in total. Suthichai claimed that Thai Rak Thai MPs had been ordered to ensure that they boosted the number of Thai Rak Thai members in each constituency to 50,000, or risk being de-selected. Their performance would be evaluated every two months, and the target date was set for July 2004.

Thailand Inc's CEO had let it be known that if the customer base isn't jacked up and sales targets aren't met, the sales and marketing departments will come under severe 'appraisal'. Direct-sales teams are being readied to take their place if the results of constant marketing research so demand.

At the same time, Suthichai argued that this was largely a psychological ploy to encourage members of other parties to defect to Thai Rak Thai: the party remained unable to make a decisive breakthrough in the South, and still faced formidable opposition in areas such as Korat. Nor was the party secure in the capital city. Despite this, Thaksin was confidently predicting not just a landslide but an 'avalanche' victory in the forthcoming election. Michael Connors has persuasively argued that Thaksin's determination to secure 400 seats reflects his desire to avoid facing no-confidence debates, since under the 1997 constitution at least 100 votes are required to call a censure motion.

Summarizing discussions from a roundtable in Khon Kaen, Pana Janwiroj argued that no less money would be spent in the Northeast region at the next election, though smaller amounts might be given out in the direct form of vote-buying. He argued that the dominance of the party had created 'the politics of Darwinism': intense competition between rival party factions, which was eroding patronage politics. Local politicians were emulating the policies of the national government, with some SAO's creating 300,000-baht development funds which operated very much like a smaller-scale version of the Thai Rak Thai village development funds. While the 30-baht health scheme and the CEO governor system were quite popular, the village development fund was more controversial, excluding the very poor, with much of the funds typically allocated to committee members. Some community leaders argued that Thai Rak Thai policies had created a culture of passivity, in which people simply waited for help from the government.
Thai Rak Thai’s hopes of sweeping Isan, and its stated ambition to win 130 of the region’s 134 seats, could not be realized so long as Chart Pattana and Chart Thai refused to merge with the party. Thai Rak Thai won 80 Northeastern seats in the 2001 general election, expanding this to 104 by absorbing Seritham and New Aspiration. For the 2005 election, Thai Rak Thai was targeting a further 27 seats — those held by Chart Thai and Chart Pattana — but the chances of winning them were quite slim.¹⁰⁹ The party faced similar problems in the South, where it was seeking to oust incumbent Democrats and was targeting 20 of the region’s 54 seats, having gained only 20 in 2001. In 2001, only 400,000 of the party’s 11 million party list votes came from the South. Traditionally, southerners were regarded as ‘the most politically-savvy voters’, less swayed by practices such as vote-buying, and often very loyal to the Democrats.¹¹⁰ But deputy Thai Rak Thai leader Sutham Saengpratun argued that Thai Rak Thai’s populist policies, plus southerners’ admiration for Thaksin’s strong, decisive image, would lead to a much better showing in the region in 2005.¹¹¹ Thai Rak Thai believed that they were very popular with Muslim voters in the South, a view contested by the Democrats, who insisted that the government’s handling of conflicts and violence in the area had alienated Muslim support. The decisive victory of the Democrats in a Songkhla by-election in February 2004 illustrated just how difficult the region remained for Thaksin’s party.

Marketing alone could not determine the outcome of Thai elections, which were still substantially determined by issues such as choice of candidate, the effectiveness of local canvassers, and the use of money, fraud and intimidation. Nevertheless, the emergence of Thai Rak Thai did mark a substantial step in the direction of a more professionalized political market place in Thailand: never before had a Thai political party engaged in such elaborate and sophisticated marketing. This development was testimony to the extent to which Thai Rak Thai was a centralized political machine, containing many elements of the electoral professional party.

LOCAL ELECTIONS

Local elections — for these purposes, elections for provincial administrative organizations, sub-district administrative organizations, municipalities, the Bangkok governor and city council, and for village headmen — posed a challenge for Thai Rak Thai. Given that Thaksin sought to operate with an overarching national mandate and political agenda, local elections of all kinds posed more of a threat than an opportunity. One of his first instincts was simply to distance the party from these processes. In September 2003, Thai Rak Thai issued a directive that banned those standing for local elections from using the party banner, or large posters of Thaksin, as part of their campaigns. Because of numerous defeats for Thai Rak Thai candidates running under the party banner, Thaksin wanted to dissociate himself from this pattern of political failure.¹¹²

Snoh Thienthong, whose influence as a faction leader was rapidly declining, told members of his Wang Namyen faction:

The notion that the party can ‘sell’ well with the current populist trend could be just wishful thinking. Individuals and canvassers still count when it comes to what can influence the decisions of the voters.

In other words, at the local level, old-fashioned tactics such as vote-buying and canvasser networks remained the key to electoral success. Thaksin was eventually forced to bow to political realities on the ground: the party rescinded the order and allowed local election candidates to run in association with Thai Rak Thai’s brand. The first test came with the 2004 provincial administrative organization elections.

The provincial administrative organization (PAO) elections of March 2004 illustrated the emergence of political tensions between the Thai Rak Thai leadership and constituency MPs. For the first time, mayors of provincial administrative organizations were directly elected. This was an interesting development for two reasons. First, immediately after the 2001 elections Thai Rak Thai
had apparently given serious consideration to the idea of abolishing PAOs – notorious for having been captured in many provinces by cabals of corrupt construction contractors – altogether. By strengthening the organizations instead of dissolving them, the party had done an about-turn. Second, the idea of elected provincial mayors seemed directly to challenge the prime minister’s idea of putting all provinces under the jurisdiction of ‘CEO’ governors. Significantly, a number of current and former MPs expressed interest in running for these posts, perhaps suspecting that they could have greater power and influence as PAO mayors than as backbench MPs.

Because government programmes such as the Village Development Fund established a direct connection with voters, the role of MPs as middlemen had been seriously curtailed. MPs were reduced merely to supporting Thaksin and his initiatives. Provincial administrative organizations were of declining importance to the government, which had effectively bypassed them by giving provincial governors ‘CEO’ powers. However, many MPs put considerable efforts into supporting PAO candidates from their own phuak (cliques) – in some cases leading competing candidates to claim Thai Rak Thai endorsement – in the hope that they could gain influence over PAO budgets and so procure some political advantage for themselves. Such MPs hoped that using the same teams of canvassers in the general election could yield dividends, ensuring they could retain their seats whatever happened to the prime minister’s popularity.

However, these tactics produced some bitter outcomes, as in Phayao province, where former minister Ladawan Wongsrirong found that MPs from a neighbouring province backed a rival PAO candidate instead of the one endorsed by her as the official party representative. Michael Nelson notes that at a Thai Rak Thai training seminar on PAO elections held in Chiang Mai in December 2003, one of the party’s deputy leaders endorsed party candidates in some northern provinces, but not the incumbent in Chiang Mai itself. As he argues:

The problem remains, however, that provincial politics are still based on phuak rather than party. This means that normally there are a number of informal political groups in any given province, mainly centered in different MP constituencies. TRT thus may have most MPs in a province without those MPs being party-oriented in their provincial-level politics. As a result, each of these groups may wish to enter its own candidate for the position of PAO nayok.

PAO elections had effectively become proxy contests between members of rival factions of the Thai Rak Thai. Nelson suggests that since the two main parties have a vested interest in seeing well-run PAOs operate under their banner, ‘provincial politics may thus become increasingly party-politicized’ – and the same might eventually apply to municipal elections. However, this politicization might apply not just to PAOs, but to provincial election commissioners. It was striking that, while politicians close to Thai Rak Thai won PAO contests in most provinces, the Election Commission showed little willingness to punish winners suspected of electoral abuses.

One solution to problematic local elections was simply to abolish them; in February 2004 Thai Rak Thai announced plans to abolish direct elections for village headmen and kamnan (sub-district heads), an act of re-centralization that would amount to a substantial reversal of political reforms enacted in recent decades. This proposal illustrated Thai Rak Thai’s lack of enthusiasm for the political reform process, and lack of concern with the needs of village communities: local elections were seen as a potential challenge to the dominance of a hegemonic national party. In this sense, Thai Rak Thai’s views closely resembled the views of Interior Ministry bureaucrats, who opposed local elections that weakened their authority over the country’s rural population. Thai Rak Thai’s overwhelming concern with parliamentary elections and the central authority of a state dominated by a single party was in this sense highly conservative. The government later backtracked on these
plans, but this flip-flopping nevertheless testified to Thaksin’s lack of commitment to a consistent stance on decentralization.

THE PARLIAMENTARY PARTY

For Thaksin’s party in government, parliament was very much subordinated to the executive power of the prime minister’s office. This was illustrated by the poor attendance of Thai Rak Thai MPs in parliament. The speaker sometimes had to close business early because parliament was inquorate, and five times between 2002 and 2004 House sessions were actually halted following head counts. Given that MPs had to attend only two half-day sessions a week, this was a lamentable state of affairs. At one point Thai Rak Thai whips proposed paying MPs meeting allowances to encourage their attendance — despite the fact that they already enjoyed high salaries by Thai standards. Yet this reluctance to attend parliament also characterized Thaksin himself, who in 2002 failed to present the required annual parliamentary report on the government’s performance in person. Sophon Ongkara wrote in The Nation:

Throughout the past year the chief executive has rarely shown up and is remembered only once for giving a brief response during question time. He has not come to thumb his nose at House motions, but he has made it plain enough that being there and listening to harangues was just a waste of his time. ... In his view, it must be that he does not regard himself as being accountable to the House.

Thaksin had a longstanding aspiration to create a 'super-party', bringing together all the parties in his coalition government under a single banner. His spokesman, Suranan Vejjajiva, claimed early on in Thaksin’s term that mergers between large and medium-sized parties were a positive step: ‘That was the intention of the drafters of the constitution. Now we are moving in that direction naturally’.

In an extraordinary move in April 2004, Chart Pattana and Chart Thai apparently agreed to become ‘subsidiaries’ of Thai Rak Thai. 123

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Thai,123 Subsidiary parties would retain nominal independence, yet take policy instructions from Thai Rak Thai — they would, however, be free to decide whether or not to support particular policies. This structure would mirror Malaysia’s Barisan Nasional, in which smaller parties took their cue from UMNO. Banharn Silpa-archa, leader of Chart Thai, expressed support for such an idea, though he said he was not clear whether his party wished to become a subsidiary of Thai Rak Thai, even hinting that they might align themselves with the Democrats.124 Thaksin himself denied that any such plan existed. Banharn also suggested the media ask the Buri Ram faction of his own party whether they planned to defect to Thai Rak Thai, since they would not tell him — a clear indication of the persistence of factional politics in the Thai party system. Nophakhun Limsamarnphun argued that a 'holding company' political party structure was now emerging as an alternative to mergers and acquisitions.125 Whereas Thai Rak Thai had successfully acquired both Serithiam and NAP, Chart Thai and Chart Pattana were still resisting full incorporation, and a holding company structure was a good alternative from Thai Rak Thai’s point of view. By suggesting that he could also align his party with the Democrats, Banharn was seeking to negotiate from a position of strength, a strength which would be largely surrendered if he were formally to embrace Thai Rak Thai. Chart Pattana, however, gradually weakened their resistance to Thai Rak Thai’s advances.

Thaksin’s fondness for incorporating other parties into Thai Rak Thai laid him open to charges of ‘parliamentary dictatorship’ — a curious Thai political felony that had been cited as a justification for both the 1991 military coup and the introduction of the reformist 1997 constitution. This was illustrated by the appointment of Suchart Tancharoen as deputy house speaker in February 2002; Suchart, a former member of the infamous ‘Group of 16’ parliamentary heavies, was an entirely inappropriate choice for a sensitive post traditionally reserved for MPs who carried a high degree of public respect. In 1999, Thaksin himself had described Suchart as the most dubious provincial politician in Thailand.126 As such, Thaksin’s failure to block the move could be judged as demonstrating his
willingness to subordinate all political principles to the goal of creating a completely unassailable mega-party.\textsuperscript{127} Unveiling a statue of former premier Chatchai Choonavan in Korat in August 2004, Thaksin called upon everyone interested in helping the country to stop squabbling and simply join Thai Rak Thai. His was becoming the ultimate catch-all political party.\textsuperscript{128}

Thaksin's preoccupation with expanding the parliamentary party - despite his complete lack of interest in parliamentary politics itself - illustrated his willingness to compromise on the quality of his party, demonstrating the extent to which Thai Rak Thai was a vehicle for his own dominance of Thai politics rather than a coherent and focused political organization. In effect, he sought to drive a wedge between elected MPs - who provided him with electoral legitimacy and were the source of his political authority - and the policy-making machine based on his own advisors and political priorities. MPs and parliament were to be tolerated and subordinated rather than appreciated and encouraged.

**THE ROLE OF THE PARTY LEADER**

The extent to which Thai Rak Thai and the Thaksin government were highly personalized is emphasized by numerous commentators. Criticism of the prime minister was rarely voiced, and those who dared to express it risked excommunication. A prime example was Ammar Siamwallar, one of Thailand's leading economists and the head of the Thailand Development Research Institute, the country's most respected policy think tank, who then took a vow of public silence on the subject of Thaksin.\textsuperscript{129} Another was former Bank of Thailand governor Vijit Supinit.

Thaksin was not solely concerned with rebutting criticism: he devoted considerable attention to promoting favourable images of himself. An English book published in 2003 describing Thai Rak Thai's policies began with a hymn of praise to the leader's family life:

In terms of his personal life, Thaksin enjoys a happy and warm family with his wife, Khunying Potjaman Shinawatra,

and three children - one son and two daughters. He has often stated in the past that the family is the most important foundation of our lives and that building warm and strong family would provide the best immunity for children from all social problems.\textsuperscript{130}

Some of this could certainly be read as a side-swipe at former prime minister and Democrat leader Chuan Leekpai, whose irregular family situation had always been a window of vulnerability; but it also testified to the extent to which Thai Rak Thai was explicitly organized around social values said to be epitomized by the party leader himself.

Senior Thai Rak Thai advisor Sanoh Thienthong hinted at his alienation from Thaksin when he suggested that 'the prime minister's thoughts run faster than the Constitution, so it might be necessary to change the law to keep up with him. He's a commander who moves faster than his army'.\textsuperscript{131} Thaksin's dominance of Thai Rak Thai was such that he personally controlled a wide range of policy areas, and typically announced new developments himself rather than delegating them to ministers and senior party officials. This was exasperating for veteran politicians and deal-makers such as Sanoh, who were used to participating in extensive backroom discussions before decisions were made public.

In a rare example of critical self-awareness, Thaksin had told *Asian Business* magazine in a 1995 interview: 'I'm the Ghengis Khan type of manager'. He went on:

'When you start a company, you need someone to propel it, to set a vision and force everyone to work like barbarians. But after a certain point you need a builder, who must be professional, so they don't need someone like me any more, who might push too hard.'\textsuperscript{132}

In a somewhat generous gloss, *The Nation* argued that Thaksin could become over-sensitive when under pressure: 'He delegates well, but at the same time does not easily trust people, and lately, because of anxiety over the election, he became sensitive and reacted
excessively to perceived criticism. However, it soon became apparent that mistrust of others, concentration of power in his own hands and intense intolerance of criticism were all standard features of Thaksin's normal operating procedure as prime minister and party leader: Thai Rak Thai, like the government it led, was an organization centred entirely around a single man. That man's confidence did not diminish as his term of office wore on: in April 2003, Thaksin declared that he expected to be prime minister himself for a further term, and that Thai Rak Thai would remain in power for at least 20 more years, leading the government long after he had stepped down. While many agreed that Thaksin would be able to win and complete a further term, the notion that his party would continue on without him at the helm met with widespread scepticism.

While an electoral professional party does give a central role to leadership, Thaksin's role in Thai Rak Thai was so dominant and so personalized that it undermined the party's claim to be a new political force. Like other recent parties such as Chamlong Srimuang's Palang Dharma and Chavalit Yongchaiyutthai's New Aspiration, Thai Rak Thai was a one-man show. Thaksin's determination to boost the number of Thai Rak Thai MPs failed to conceal the fact that however large Thai Rak Thai became, it would owe its existence solely to his own participation and leadership.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Thai Rak Thai is a new kind of Thai political party in the sense that it is run by a highly professional core group of advisors and managers, using the latest polling and marketing methods, and placing much more emphasis on policy initiatives than previous Thai parties. Thai Rak Thai has sought to bypass the existing linkages between ordinary voters and local politicians and MPs, creating a direct connection between the electorate and the government. At the same time, Thai Rak Thai does not meet all Panebianco's criteria for the status of 'electoral professional' party: despite its strategies and rhetoric, the party remains fundamentally reliant on traditional Thai forms of campaigning and canvassing, many of them illegal. Furthermore, the sense in which the party is simply a political vehicle for its leader undermines its credibility: no one seriously believes that the party would survive a change of leader-ship, since the party appears to lack any wider institutional identity or coherence.

Much of the success of Thai Rak Thai in its early years was based on 'feel-good' factors: during the 2001 election the positive image of Thaksin compared with Chuan and the Democrats; and following the election, the economic recovery presided over by the new prime minister. How far the party could survive an economic downturn or some other political crisis remained to be seen. Although to date Thaksin's coalition appeared secure, there was always the danger that disgruntled former allies might join forces with the Democrat Party, and that following a drop in Thaksin's popularity other parties could use similar marketing strategies to emulate the successes of Thai Rak Thai. This possibility appeared less likely following the revival of the Mahachon Party, by former Democrat secretary-general Sanan Kachornprasart, in mid-2004. Sanan led a team of Democrat defectors, including former Thammasat University political scientist Anek Laothamatas, in setting up a new political outfit that would be well placed to form an accommodation with Thaksin following the forthcoming election. The new party was widely rumoured to have received financial support from sources close to Thai Rak Thai.

For adherents of political economy approaches, Thai Rak Thai is not an electoral professional party. Baker has argued that Thai Rak Thai is a party of the business elite. Finally, the Sino-Thai nouveau riche have given up working through front men and intermediaries, and used the political system to take direct control of the Thai economy: 'big domestic capital has come right into the core of Thai politics.' Ockey, who sees Thaksin's attempts to build a grand coalition as the most distinctive feature of his political strategy, suggests that Thai Rak Thai's grand coalition contains 'inherent
economic paradoxes. Building a grand coalition is ultimately a means of bypassing faction leaders; this has involved deploying considerable financial resources and employing 'legal forms of patronage on a vast scale.' Given that Ockey still believes factions and their associated local electoral networks remain the key to political power in the Thai context, he argues that Thai Rak Thai's expensive experiment may be inherently unsustainable – quite apart from wider questions about Thailand's oppositional political culture, or whether Thaksin could successfully hand over the party leadership to anyone else.

Michael Nelson similarly questions the extent to which Thai Rak Thai was capable of institutionalizing itself into a more plausible political party:

It seems the jury is still out on whether TRT will indeed develop into the first full-blown Thai electoral professional party, or whether merely a modernized version of the personalized and temporary ad hoc parties, such as Chart Thai, Chart Pattana, New Aspiration, Samakkhi Tham, Social Action, and, to a large degree, Palang Dharma.

The acid test for Thai Rak Thai concerns the extent to which the national appeal of the party and its leader, fostered through marketing campaigns and policies calculated to reach out directly to rural voters, can transcend the traditional political realities of phuak-based local canvassing and campaigning. There are two ways in which this could happen: traditional canvassers could be incorporated into a new party-led system; or local networks could be completely bypassed by a different mode of political participation. So far, the evidence for either of these trends is patchy. Rather, Thai Rak Thai takes old-fashioned phuak-based politics to new heights, transforming political factions into extensive and complex networks centring on Thaksin himself.

NOTES

1 Straits Times, 12 December 2003.

2 The best 'political economy' discussion of Thai parties is to be found in Sungisdh Phiyarangsan and Pasuk Phongpaichit, Jitsamuk lae udomkan khong khuban kan prachatipatrai ruam samai [Consciousness and Ideology of the Contemporary Democracy Movement], Bangkok, Political Economy Centre, Chulalongkorn University, 1996. The volume is especially useful for its excellent histories of various political parties.

3 See James Ockey, 'Political parties, factions and corruption in Thailand, Modern Asian Studies, 28, 2, 1994, pp. 251–277. Ockey's stress on factions reflects the influence of political economy approaches, though he also draws on culturalist readings of Thai politics.

4 Other examples of plausible public faces as prime minister were Prem, Chatichai and, to a much lesser extent, Chavalit. Suchinda and Banharn had short terms as prime minister, in part precisely because they were unable credibly to front their administrations.


6 It may be objected that electoral politics even in developed democracies is overshadowed by issues of campaign finance; while this is certainly true, it hardly excuses the abuses practised routinely by most Thai politicians.


8 On the background to Thailand's reform process, Duncan McCargo, 'Alternative meanings of political reform in Thailand', The Copenhagen
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9 Tasker and Prangthip, ‘New-age leader’.


12 Ockey, ‘Political parties’.


15 Examples include the two Chulalongkorn University political science professors who were best known internationally at the beginning of the 1990s: Chai-Anan Samudavanija pursued a series of new careers, including newspaper columnist, Chair of Thai Airways International and principal of a high-class secondary school; while Suchit Bunbongkarn became a member of the Constitutional Court.


21 Panebianco, Political Parties, p. 264.


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45 The proximity of many supposedly neutral senators to the ruling party was made clear in June 2003, when Kasem Rungthhakiat quit the Senate on the grounds that he had grown too close to Thai Rak Thai (The Nation, 8 June 2003). Similarly, 26 senators who had previously supported a petition for the review of two controversial telecom decrees abruptly changed their minds around the same time, suggesting that the ruling party was systematically lobbying senators to toe the government line. They were widely believed to be among a group of between 30 and 40 senators who had been considering resigning en masse to join Thai Rak Thai. This sort of tendency illustrated the extent to which the aims of the 1997 constitution-drafters were being flouted in spirit. Such tendencies were confirmed when Thaksin, who had publicly urged senators to cooperate with the government, attended the birthday party of Srimuang Charoensri, a senator who had been instrumental in ousting controversial senate speaker and former coup leader Manoon(krit) Roopkachorn (The Nation, 15 July 2003). At the party, Thaksin was told that senators sympathetic to Thai Rak Thai would soon seize control of the chairmanship of the Senate Committee on Public Participation, which had often criticized the government under current chair, the outspoken former academic and broadcaster Chermsee Pinthong. The February 2004 election of a new senate speaker was characterized by 'alleged rampant vote-buying, blackmail and intimidation', so ensuring that a candidate with close ties to the Thaksin administration was chosen (The Nation, editorial, 2 March 2004). 'Self-respecting senators who perform their duty honestly are few and far between and thus have little if any impact on the working of the Senate as a whole'.


48 Ockey, 'Change and continuity', p. 679.


50 The Nation, 29 July 2003.

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51 The Nation, 21 August 2003.

52 The Nation, 22 August 2003.

53 The bypassing of constituency MPs helps explain the growing interest of local phuak in provincial and sub-district council elections, which could grant access to substantial local development budgets.

54 Baker, 'Pluto-populism'. In practice, Thai Rak Thai has so far set up nine regional coordination branches.

55 Nelson, 'Thailand's house elections', pp. 290–291. Nevertheless, some of those who have been given party jackets and membership cards may be encouraged to vote for Thai Rak Thai, especially if there is follow-up on these initial contacts.


57 The Nation, 24 November 2003.

58 By November 2003, 52 of the 88 parties in existence in 1997 had been dissolved by the Constitutional Court following complaints from the Election Commission (The Nation, 5 November 2003). Many had failed to register the required 5,000 members within 180 days, while others failed to submit annual reports to the EC or to account for grants they received.

59 The Nation, 5 November 2003.

60McCargo, 'Thailand's political parties', p. 122.


64 Pasuk and Baker, Thaksin, p. 229.


67 The Australian, 8 March 2001.


69 Bangkok Post, 3 October 2000.

70 Bangkok Post, 1 July 2001.

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81 For a critical discussion, see Chang Noi, *The Nation*, 1 March 2004.
83 Pansak angrily rejected allegations by senator Chermak Pinthong that he had lobbied for the government to bail out Sondhi's M Group in 2002, insisting that he had not talked to Sondhi for years. See *The Nation*, 3 May 2002.
84 Business Wire, 5 December 1995.
85 *The Nation*, 16 March 2002.
88 *The Nation*, 16 August 2000.

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101 Pasuk and Baker, *Thaksin*, pp. 137–139. We do not share Pasuk and Baker's views on the significance of this speech.
105 The marketing offensive engaged in by Thai Rak Thai posed challenges to the opposition Democrats. While deputy leader Anek Laothamatas argued that the Democrat Party used its 192 branches to involve local people and listen to the voices of the grassroots (*The Nation*, 22 June 2003), he did not rule out slicker marketing by the Democrats at the next election. He told an interviewee: 'We have to accept that in this day and age of politics, good policies need good marketing to drive forward'. In practice, however, matching Thai Rak Thai's marketing skills proved beyond the Democrat Party throughout the 2001 to 2005 parliament.
107 Connors, 'Thaksin's Thailand'.
114 Nelson, Thailand's house elections', p. 257.
118 Nelson, 'Politicizing local governments', p. 9.
The leaders of the Armed Forces are very disciplined. They support the Government firmly, especially myself, since I come from the Armed Forces academy. We have very good relations. So we have no problems. — Thaksin Shinawatra, New Straits Times, 10 July 2003.

We adhere to the no-interference-with-politics principle. At present, the armed forces don’t interfere with politics, anyway. Yet, as the military and the armed forces are one of the government’s instruments, we have to collaborate with the government. Nowadays, the military is already in order. Politics and government are two different things and you have to learn to distinguish them.

— General Chaisit Shinawatra, Army Commander-in-Chief, from the army official policy statement, 10 October 2003, quoted in Matichon Weekend, 17–23 October 2003.

THAKSIN SHINAWATRA HAS BEEN WIDELY CREDITED with political decisiveness, for his determination to advance his own agenda, and with a desire to bring the market discipline of the private sector to bear on the sometimes lumbering bureaucratic machinery of the Thai government. Curiously, however, some sacred cows remain. Thaksin has practically never mentioned the military during his Saturday morning radio programmes to the nation, and he has yet to articulate a clear vision for military reform. Indeed, under