First published in 2005 by NIAS Press
Nordic Institute of Asian Studies
Leifsgade 33, DK–2300 Copenhagen S, Denmark
tel: (+45) 3532 9501 · fax: (+45) 3532 9549
E-mail: books@niass.ku.dk · Website: www.niaspress.dk

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
McCargo, Duncan
The Thaksinization of Thailand. - (Studies in contemporary Asian history ; 4)
1. Title II. Pathmanand, Ukrist
320.9'593'09051

ISBN 87-91114-45-4 (cloth)
ISBN 87-91114-46-2 (paper)
L.D.: SE-5529-2004 in Spain

Typesetting by Translations ved LJ
Production by Bookchase
Printed in the European Union

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CHAPTER 5

Thaksin’s Political Discourse

Like the many philosophers who said that if you want to be a good leader, you have to be a master of story-telling, so you have to tell the public that you are leading them to a better place. Otherwise, the resistance to change will be too much.

It is very difficult for Asian people, especially the Buddhists, to follow the vision because they are satisfied with their current life. They may complain a little bit but they are fine. – Thaksin Shinawatra, New Straits Times, 10 July 2003.

TO A MUCH GREATER EXTENT than any other figure in Thai politics, Thaksin Shinawatra has sought to promote his agenda and career through the assiduous use of marketing, a strong emphasis on language and systematic attempts to influence and control the country’s media. This approach reflected insights he and his advisors had derived from examining the changing political climate in developed countries such as the United States and Britain, where there was growing evidence that voters could be swayed by the judicious choice of attractive language. Since the voting public frequently mistrusted politicians and were sceptical about their promises, the key to attracting important groups of ‘swing’ voters was to present oneself as a new kind of politician, an anti-politician politician.

The popular anonymously-published Joe Klein novel Primary Colors, a thinly-disguised account of Bill Clinton’s 1992 election campaign, had highlighted these themes: Jack Stanton, the Clinton character, is a master of beguiling buzz phrases, typically seeking to avoid fixed positions by emphasizing abstract emotions and values. In a book on Clinton, Klein identifies his most impressive speech as one in which he reduced his political agenda to series of abstractions: choice, opportunity, responsibility and community. Similar ideas were adopted by Tony Blair in the 1997 British general election campaign, using the slogan ‘New Labour, New Britain’.

This was a rebranded political party stripped of its old political language, presenting itself not in terms of traditional left-wing ideas, but as a vibrant alternative to the prevailing Conservative-dominated order. Jennifer Lees-Marschment describes how Labour engaged in extensive product design, product adjustment, implementation and communication strategies in the run-up to the 1997 general election. Thai Rak Thai was the inheritor of this Clinton-Blair mantle of deft rebranding, the recreation of words and images.

Norman Fairclough, in his book New Labour, New Language, argues that under Blair’s leadership, Labour set about ‘forging’ a new politics, which actually required a new language in order to express its ideas, aspirations and goals; furthermore: ‘New Labour is involved in a “reinvention of government” which in itself entails a greater salience for language.’ On Blair’s rhetorical style, Fairclough unpacks a number of Blair personae that emerge from various speeches and interviews: ‘Tony Blair does not always speak in the same way, but he has a distinctive repertoire of ways of speaking which he moves between in a recognisable way.’ One of these is the persona of Blair the ‘normal person’, who does not sound like a politician, and who indeed once wrote ‘I don’t actually feel much like a politician.’

Fairclough argues that it is undesirable constantly to craft language in order to win support, since this is no basis for the establishment of long-term trust, but leads ultimately to ‘contempt for politics’. This implies that a marketing-driven approach to politics is inherently dangerous and undesirable. This chapter approaches Thaksin from this perspective, asking whether the crafting of language he has practised is part of a marketing-driven approach.

The problem here is that Thaksin himself is not adept at using language in such creative ways. Thaksin Shinawatra is no Blair or
Clinton: he is not especially articulate, is not a good public speaker and lacks both stage presence and an easy television manner. He is not an especially good front man for his own marketing campaign; unlike the consummate professional politician Tony Blair, he is not really capable of reshaping his personality for political advantage. Unlike Bill Clinton, he would hardly relish the opportunity to improvise if his aides gave him the wrong text for an important political speech. In the Thai context, Thaksin’s political language operates quite differently from that of prominent Western politicians. Thaksin operates with a large team of staffers who prep him extensively, yet in the end often speaks off-the-cuff. This means that Thaksin’s language is sometimes wobbly – leave him alone in a radio studio and he is quite likely to drift off-message, reverting to his ‘real’ self, ranting about his critics and sounding hopelessly shrill. In other words, there are two main modes of Thaksin’s political language: scripted and unscripted. Whereas truly professional politicians such as Clinton are self-scripting, never exposing their real thoughts to the wider public, Thaksin struggles constantly to subordinate his real self to the higher demands of the marketing project. This tension in him is rather interesting, producing a constant disjuncture between official and unofficial forms of language. In his pre-political life as a wealthy business tycoon, he was completely at liberty to speak his mind; old habits die hard.

THAKSIN’S WEEKLY RADIO PROGRAMME

On 28 April, Thaksin began giving weekly radio broadcasts on Saturday mornings, in imitation of the American president. By November 2001, the programmes were being transmitted on at least 385 radio stations nationwide, from 8.00 am to 8.30 am. The programme was originally confined to stations operated by the Public Relations Department, but quickly spread to practically every station in the country. This was the first time in Thai history that a prime minister had his own weekly radio programme. The radio medium was convenient both for the presenter – who could easily broadcast the programme from outside Bangkok or even outside Thailand – and for listeners, who could tune in at work or while commuting. As The Nation explained:

The concept is simple: Thaksin chats casually about domestic or global events of the week. Government policies and performance are discussed, but not as a direct official report of achievements. The premier may put on a straight reporting style, go on the defensive or offensive, be sarcastic or ironic. He pleads for public support and understanding … Program host Hiranyaprul opens the radio program but never knows beforehand what Thaksin plans to speak about and is not supposed either to ask questions or raise points during the show.

Behind the scenes, a team of government spokesmen serve as the show’s editorial staff. The team monitors incidents during the week and selects interesting items. The number of issues brought up is not fixed, ranging between 10 and 30 stories according to the situation each week.

The administration plans four or five topics that will steer the direction of news interest, according to an informed source. Thaksin occasionally announces new policies, such as the construction of roads to boost employment, which sometimes backfires by stirring heated debate. Thaksin always chooses to act first rather than have his hand forced. He doesn’t mind if his initiatives sometimes backfire because in most cases they are successful. In ‘Prime Minister Thaksin talks to the people,’ he is able to direct people’s attention and opinions, even though he may occasionally draw criticism.

Thaksin prefers to change the situation rather than being forced to change by it. He is not pleased if the ploys initiated by him do not go as planned. In any case, it shows that the incumbent administration has a well-organized management and that its leader will not allow himself to be put on the defensive. The moral of the story is that the winner is the person who controls the game.

Thaksin’s radio programme aroused the interest of the Election Commission, which planned to monitor the broadcasts to ensure that
he did not talk about Thai Rak Thai's policies or campaign for his candidates in the run-up to any elections. Thaksin was, however, free to use the programme to talk about his work as prime minister. This distinction between Thaksin the politician and Thaksin the prime minister was clearly a difficult one to understand, let alone to police. Another controversial aspect of the programmes was their length — during 2002, Thaksin began to exceed the length of his half-hour slot by up to 15 minutes, thereby encroaching into the airtime of other scheduled broadcasters. One DJ, Nattakarn Panniam, threatened to take Thaksin to the Administrative Court; her show’s private sponsors were unhappy at their promotional opportunities being curtailed. Arguably, Thaksin’s appropriation of time belonging to others illustrated his sense of superior entitlement to public and private resources. Eventually, the length of the broadcasts was extended to a whole hour.

The programmes addressed an extremely wide range of subjects, and were in any case rather miscellaneous. Rather than focusing each week on a particular theme, Thaksin would hop from one issue to another, expressing his views on whatever was topical — or simply whatever was bothering him. He frequently spent much of the broadcast listing the activities he had been engaged in over the previous week, telling stories about his life and work designed to demonstrate his dedication to the job of prime minister. Issues covered in 2003 included emotive discussions of the war on drugs (3 March), a report on the first joint Thai-Cambodian cabinet meeting (31 May), the arrest of a Jemaah Islamiyah terrorist suspect in Thailand (16 August), praise for the creation of Thailand’s first Islamic bank (2 September), his vision for ‘One District, One Dream School’ (7 October), his reasons for despatching Thai troops to Iraq (8 November) and the logic behind his latest cabinet reshuffle (15 November). Thaksin claimed that he normally made the broadcast wearing pyjamas, a relaxed approach which could help explain the combination of informality and carelessness that sometimes crept into his statements on air. The importance of the broadcasts was illustrated by the fact that collections of transcripts were published in book form and were made available on the web within a couple of days of each programme going out.

The opposition Democrats had no equivalent means of expressing their views to the public, and were unable to secure a similar radio slot. In response, Democrat leader Chuan Leekpai launched a web-based 20 minute weekly programme, ‘Chuan Online’, at his website www.chuan.org in August 2002. By making his broadcast on a Sunday, he was able to respond to Thaksin’s programme the previous day. Though internet access remained relatively limited outside urban areas, the Chuan programme was followed closely by the media and helped the Democrats contribute to setting the news agenda for the week.

Thaksin’s broadcasts offer some of the most interesting examples of his political language, and therefore deserve a degree of scrutiny. They represent a clear attempt by the prime minister to open a direct channel of communication with ordinary people, using a simple and intimate technology. For the rest of the week, most of his messages to the public would be channelled through news reports in ways he could not fully control, but the weekly broadcasts were his own special space, giving him the chance to explore some of his thoughts with the people and frequently to announce new plans and initiatives. Sopon Ongkara argued that this was his favourite method of communication:

If he wants the people to hear his message, he prefers to let it be known heard — in one-way communication — on his radio chat programme every Saturday morning. He can say whatever he wants, all by himself in a studio, without nuisances or disruptive questions from anyone, least of all the tenacious Opposition.

Predictably, on the Saturday morning following the House debate on the government’s report on its performance, Dr Thaksin was very talkative on his radio show, making earnest pleas to his audience to understand and give him more time. It was an exceptional soft sell...

Again emulating figures such as Blair, Thaksin sought to live up to his ‘Think new, act new’ slogan by constantly proposing new policies
and ideas. His radio programme was one of his favourite places for announcing these. The weekend was typically a slow news period; his Saturday broadcast fed easily into the Sunday newspapers and often generated discussions that would spill over onto the Monday front pages. Hence the radio broadcast was a regular means by which he sought to set the news agenda for the week with issues of his own preference and choosing. At the same time, this approach was not without risks: the steady diet of new promises raised hopes that could not always be realized. The other danger was that he would himself drift ‘off message’, using broadcasts for negative rather than positive purposes. Suthichai Yoon argued that this was exactly what was happening:

For the past few weeks, the prime minister is using more and more of the air-time to vent his frustration at his critics. Instead of talking about vision and reporting on progress of his government’s work in dealing with pressing economic and social problems, Thaksin tends to ramble and resorts to finger pointing.19

In one broadcast in late 2001, Thaksin challenged those in the media who had criticized him during an official trip to Japan, declaring: ‘If you hate me, postpone the hate while I’m doing duties for my country’. In an editorial, Thai Rath newspaper reproached Thaksin for using the word ‘hate’ at least three times in his broadcast, arguing that Thaksin should not accuse academics or journalists who criticized the government’s policies of hating him personally, or confuse their criticisms with ‘scolding’ and ‘ridicule’.20

**THEMES OF THAKSIN’S POLITICAL LANGUAGE**

What are the themes of Thaksin’s political language? It will be argued here that Thaksin’s primary mode of address is didactic, like that adopted by the majority of Thai writers and public figures. The dominant themes of his public language are his own life and career (as moral exempla, rather like the life of the Buddha); the potted themes of his favourite management texts (airport bookstall readings on ‘how to’ improve efficiency, effectiveness and profits); a discourse of moderate nationalism; and a populist engagement with the concerns of ordinary people, articulated through references to a ‘social contract’ and associated policies. Combined with these broadly positive themes is a dissonant subtext: what appears to be a venomous loathing of his critics, a streak of anxiety, an undertone of insecurity that can border on the paranoid.

**Didacticism**

The pervasive nature of didacticism in Thai public discourse is difficult to understate. McCarg has argued that Thai newspaper columnists, whether popular or academic in style, frequently resort to didactic modes of discourse.21 Thai writers, journalists and academics often seem almost incapable of eschewing the didactic mode, a mode they have learned from their own parents and teachers as well as from the incessant moralizing of the Buddhist fraternity. The same mode is also frequently favoured by politicians and other public figures. Most notably, it is the dominant mode of speech adopted by His Majesty the King.22 This emphasis on didacticism has cultural underpinnings, reflecting deep respect for teachers, monks and superiors, and derives from an intensely hierarchical social structure. The Thai public has apparently long accepted the right of their leaders to lecture them; meetings in the Thai context are generally organized around one-way processes, in which senior people speak and their inferiors listen. Despite his claims to modernity, Thaksin was also completely immersed in this Thai approach to communication, which reflects an essentially paternalistic stance towards the public and the electorate. Indicative of his penchant for didacticism were his frequent claims that he would devote himself to teaching when he stepped down as prime minister – rather like his mentor Chamlong Srimuang, who founded a leadership school when he withdrew from full-time politics – and his spending a day teaching mathematics in a high school.

**Thaksin’s life as message**

An important element of the Thai Rak Thai campaign was an emphasis on Thaksin as a self-made man, including the billboard slogan
'Let me use my life's knowledge and experience to solve the problems of the people.' Pasuk and Baker argue that Thaksin turned his life story into a *tanman*, or political legend, which was only loosely based on real circumstances and events. This legend was supported by carefully edited potted biographical sketches, including claims that he almost went bankrupt three times. As *The Nation* argued: 'Many are mesmerized by his vision and business success, as many Americans see Bill Gates as their model for success.' In other words:

If he can make so much money for himself, incant his slogans, think what he can do for you. No one, it seems, worries much that the main source of Mr Thaksin's wealth is precisely the sort of cosy arrangement that Thailand needs to get rid of.\(^{25}\)

Thaksin's life story has been extensively chronicled by others. One interesting example was the book *Jak khon tua yai su jai duang noi* (From a big guy to a small heart), published in 2003, which dealt with Thaksin's ideas about educational reform and human resource development:

The book opens with flashbacks to his childhood in a small Chiang Mai district. He recounts how he received his early education at a temple school behind a fresh [food] market. His school occupied a temple ground and classes were conducted in salas, or wooden structures set on poles and without walls. Despite coming from a remote area, his progress depended on education.\(^{26}\)

Thaksin stressed the importance of internet skills, English and international culture in order to survive in the modern world, while education reform needed to create a society that generated its own intellectual capital.

Speaking to a Buddhist foundation in 1999, Thaksin talked about his understanding of the teachings of the great twentieth-century scholar-monk Buddhadasa. Then, true to form, he lapsed into reminiscence, explaining how after he finished his time as deputy prime minister in the Banharn government he found himself suffering for a year from a spiritual malaise. He was eventually able to shake off this sickness after being given a personal sermon by Phra Issaramunee, one of Buddhadasa's disciples. The lesson here was that even a wealthy and powerful man needed to remember the importance of adhering to morality and religious teachings.\(^{27}\) Ironically, the monk concerned may not have heeded his own teachings: Phra Issaramunee left his temple in disgrace in 2001, after becoming 'embroiled in a messy sex and embezzlement scandal.'\(^{28}\)

Thaksin appeared to have a good understanding of the importance of such narratives. He told a Malaysian interviewer:

Like the many philosophers who said that if you want to be a good leader, you have to be a master of story-telling, so you have to tell the public that you are leading them to a better place. Otherwise, the resistance to change will be too much.

It is very difficult for Asian people, especially the Buddhists, to follow the vision because they are satisfied with their current life. They may complain a little bit but they are fine.\(^ {29}\)

In other words, political messages had to be cloaked in didactic tales, which emphasized the moral exempla offered by leaders to the wider population. In the context of an essentially conservative society such as Thailand's, successful leadership was all about effective story-telling.

**Management-speak**

Thaksin's weakness for hanging on the utterances of selected international management gurus provided a counterbalance to his use of nationalistic and personalized rhetoric. Both he and some of his most senior ministerial colleagues (notably Somkid Jatusripitak, Surakiart Sathirathai and Purachai Piamsombun) held American doctorates, and he was singularly inclined to see the latest business bible as a source of profoundly valuable insights. He took to recommending management books to his cabinet colleagues, and his selections were even given special billing in Central bookstore and the Bangkok bookstore chain Asia Books. The names of leading American universities such as Harvard were regularly intoned by Thaksin.
Thaksin's enthusiasm for receiving the latest wisdom from Harvard reached new heights when he proposed spending between 45 and 50 million baht to bring Harvard Business School professor Michael Porter to Thailand for a single day, to give a lecture to government and business leaders that would help them understand the challenges for Thailand to achieve global competitiveness.30 The idea rebounded when Professor Porter's office denied that such an offer had been made, saying instead that the Thai government had offered less than half of this sum for him to carry out a six month research project on prospects for Thailand's economic recovery. The thrust of the idea testified to an interesting combination of boldness and generosity, a willingness to buy in good ideas and act accordingly. Yet it also reflected a deference to American interpretations and solutions that sat oddly with Thaksin's talk of local wisdom and self-help.

Porter visited Thailand in 2003, and spelled out the results of his rather costly researches into Thailand's competitiveness. His report was not a hymn of praise for Thaksin's achievements; rather, he focused on the failures of the Thai government to address the core problem of productivity, stressing that despite positive overall growth rates, ordinary Thai people were not becoming more productive or better-off. Porter made various recommendations, including the need for greater competition among local companies, more transparent bidding processes and government moves to challenge vested interests.31 He also stressed that economic policy should be decentralized to the regional level. None of these recommendations sat easily with Thaksin's growth-centred and export-driven approach to economic recovery. Suthichai Yoon argued that: 'to prove that the government wasn't using the well-known Harvard professor only as part of its branding an marketing package', the government ought to commission a panel of local experts to work on his detailed analyses and recommendations.32 It was ironic that Thaksin felt the need to commission a Western expert to tell Thais what most of them already knew, and even more ironic that he failed to act on the detailed advice of his hand-picked and highly paid consultant. Some critics suggested that Porter was destined to become one of Thaksin's 'monthly gurus', who would quickly pass from favour after tendering the 'wrong' advice.

Somkid Jatusripitak credited the American marketing guru Philip Kotler of Northwestern University – with whom he had co-authored two books – as a crucial influence on his own thinking. It was typical of Thaksin to have as his close advisor someone who had collaborated intensively with a leading US author of business books. Kotler gave a seminar on political marketing in Thailand in 2001, but got into hot water with the audience when he seemed to suggest that the press should adopt a positive role in relation to government policies.33

Concerned with the slow pace of bureaucratic reform, Thaksin organized an intensive MBA-style training course for some 200 permanent secretaries, department heads, state enterprise bosses and provincial governors. Overseen by deputy prime minister Somkid Jatusripitak, the course represented what a government house source termed 'a top-down strategic approach to policy management'.34 True to form, the government planned to invite various global gurus (some of whom never came) to address the trainees: including former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, Dipak Jain (dean of the Kellogg Business School at Northwestern University) and Narayana Murthy (chairman of Infosys Co, an Indian-based software giant). Murthy had earlier spoken at a National Science and Technology Development Agency seminar, expounding upon lessons Thailand could draw from India's successful development of an IT industry.35 Following the seminar he had a private meeting with Thaksin.

Straight out of management textbooks was Thaksin's radical proposal to move Thailand's clocks forward by one hour, to place the country in the same time zone as Singapore, Hong Kong and Malaysia. He was quoted as saying these three economies were in good health and the time adjustment will benefit the Thai stock market.36 This was an example of the kind of deadline-grabbing Thaksin proposal that went nowhere, a one-day wonder of an idea.

A typical Thaksin speech was one he gave to the Thailand chapter of the Young Presidents Organization (YPO), at Bangkok's Plaza Athenee Hotel on 19 August 2003.37 He opened with a reference to
a book he had recommended the previous week, *It's Alive*, which emphasized the need for highly adaptive business enterprises. After a quick summary of the book's arguments, he moved on to a second management book, *Leading at the Speed of Growth*, which stressed that a leader had to change as his organization changed. Taking these management texts as cues, he referred to some recent developments in Thailand and in his own life – the IMF programme, his constitutional court case, the events of 11 September and the attendant difficulties he faced in dealing with the country's economic problems in his first year. He moved on to explain how the principles of rapid adaptation and responsive leadership had served him well in dealing with this situation. The key was successful delegation:

I have no work. I have no ministries to supervise, and authority has been delegated to deputy prime ministers. Managers must delegate ...

He stressed that human resources could only be developed if people read more:

As far as I know, graduates with local bachelor's degrees who do not read will not get anywhere. They need to read all the time to become well rounded.

He concluded with a clear indication of his didactic impulses:

I will stay another five years, two terms, as there will not be any challenge left for me. I will go and teach. There will be no poverty, no 'mafia' or societal ills.

The speech showed clear influences of management textbooks: a series of bullet points held together by a certain thematic thread, but essentially incoherent. Thaksin was attempting to include a range of buzz phrases, scoring political points and highlighting the most positive features of his own record, whilst ostensibly talking about issues such as adaptability. His own life and political persona were inextricable from the arguments he sought to advance; he could scarcely hold back from his favourite theme, his own personal triumphs and leadership abilities. It was the speech of a successful businessman who skims lots of management books, perhaps while taking planes (he mentioned in the speech that he had made more than 50 overseas trips since becoming prime minister). It was not the speech of a systematic thinker, nor of a professional politician: the tendency to boast was too pronounced.

**Nationalism**

Pasuk and Baker argue that Thaksin engages in a very muted nationalism, noting that Thai Rak Thai does not make much use of the conservative images of the Thai map and the national flag: 'Thaksin's party's slogan ends with "for every Thai", not "to cure the nation's problems" like Chat Thai'. They also quote Thaksin himself as saying 'I am not calling for people to become nationalistic, but to have a sense of nationhood'; and note that he prefers to talk about *banmuang* (a loose term for people and society) rather than 'harder' terms such as *chat* (nation). His use of nationalist rhetoric chimed in with the popular feelings of resentment towards the West that had been generated by the 1997 economic crisis. Thais referred to this period as the 'IMF era', and were deeply critical of the perceived mismanagement of international financial institutions. Indeed, one survey showed that a majority of Thais believed that the economic crisis had been caused by the IMF. At a time when the ruling Democrats were seen as a 'pro-IMF' party, adopting a kind of nationalistic posture was electorally very expedient for Thai Rak Thai. Yet how deep did Thaksin's nationalist thinking run?

Discussions of Thai nationalism typically focus on conservative ideas of the Thai nation, articulated in various forms by Rama VI (who coined the phrase 'nation, religion, king'), Phibunsongkhram and Sarit Thanarat. Political parties with names such as Chart Thai, Prachakorn Thai and Chart Pattana played on such ideas; the first two parties dated back to the 1970s, while the last was actually a Chart Thai spin-off party. However the most important new parties of the 1980s and early 1990s omitted the words 'Chat' and 'Thai' from their titles. Although both were founded by retired generals,
Palang Dharma (moral force) and New Aspiration adopted a moral, aspirational stance as their core identity rather than a conservative, nationalist stance. Palang Dharma founder Chamlong Srimuang articulated ideas of localism and Thai-ness (khwam pen thai) in a low-key fashion, transmuting conservative, Cold War constructs of the nation into a moderate, alternative nationalism which tapped into a collective nostalgia for a simpler mode of rural life. Like Thaksin, however, Chamlong was of Chinese descent; the irony underpinning his quest for Thai-ness was that he was himself culturally lukjin. Here is one key to unpacking Thaksin’s nationalism, and the party name—meaning ‘Thais love Thai’—shows that at one level, he did protesteth too much. Asserting his Thai-ness so boldly was an important manoeuvre to counter any ambiguity concerning his own ethnicity and identity.

Kasian Tejapira distinguishes between two modes of resurgent nationalism in post-crisis Thailand: what he terms the ‘crony capitalist nationalism’ of big business groups and the ‘radical populist nationalism’ of NGOs and social activists. Arguably, the key to Thaksin’s electoral success was his ability to tap into both strands of nationalist sentiment, though Kasian notes in a postscript that crony capitalist nationalism quickly gained the upper hand over the more radical variety once Thaksin gained power. Jim Glassman argues that the Thaksin government’s economic nationalism is a distinctly post-colonial and even “post-nationalist” phenomenon. Essentially, he sees this nationalism as a ploy to divert attention from the real priorities of the Thai leadership:

In particular, while TRT’s dominant social supporters have maintained their international economic profile throughout the moment of Thai ‘nationalism’, the party’s leadership has increasingly tried to truncate the political space available to popular organizations opposing its policies, particularly by adopting an anti-internationalist position as the measure of patriotism and social responsibility. Thus, TRT’s scale politics reveal that it is ‘nationalist’ only in the sense that it is both limited and politically calculating.
It overture was a patriotic song hailing the heroes of Ban Rajan who snatched up swords to defend the kingdom from Burmese invaders in the late 1700s, while a gigantic Thai flag served as a backdrop. Prime Minister Thaksin stood in front of the local and international press corps and announced proudly: 'From now on, we are free of the IMF. That almost drew tears from emotional fans on the front row who gave a standing ovation to show their support. Supporters were overwhelmed, and even critics of his populist tendencies conceded it was his best performance to date ....

Thaksin urged Thai people to fly the national flag as a symbol to show the Kingdom's freedom from the stand-by credit agency...

Thaksin said: 'Debt to the IMF was a pain for the nation, and I promise you that if I am still around, this debt to the IMF will be our last.'

The real message, therefore, is not about 'independence', but about 'how independence was achieved'. Thaksin on Thursday evening was telling the Thai public that if they trust their leader, all dangers will be overcome. That long dormant political line, made famous by former strongman and prime minister Field Marshal Plaek Pibulsongkram, has come back to life.50

This episode suggests that Pasuk and Baker's notion of Thaksin's nationalism as essentially moderate may need revision; as time passed and the premier gained in confidence, he appeared increasingly willing to engage in a much more strident conservative nationalist language and rhetoric, using symbols such as the national flag in a far cruder fashion than before. Political analyst Sunai Phasuk told Associated Press: 'He presents himself as the champion, the guardian of the country. That is his image'.51 Thaksin staged a repeat performance in the year 2004, addressing a Bangkok stadium full of supporters 'decked out in the blue, white and red of the national flag'.52 This time, he called on all Thais to fly the national flag at their homes and offices, on the auspicious occasion of the Queen's 72nd birthday.53

Nationalism is only one element in Thaksin's rhetoric, however; a further strand is the distinction between Asia and the West. Thaksin is often eager to include other Asians (notably the Chinese, Malaysians, Singaporeans and Indians) within his circle of reference, expanding 'we' beyond the borders of Thailand, to include other vibrant Asian economies with features worthy of emulation. Weaker Asian economies are in close proximity, but one step removed from Thailand itself. In meetings with Chinese leaders, Thaksin is believed to have called for Asians to play a more proactive economic role vis-à-vis the West. He made this argument explicitly in April 2002 in his speech to the Bo'ao Forum for Asia, a China-sponsored gathering Asian political and economic leaders:

Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra complained that Asian economies 'concentrate more on fighting each other in price wars than on forging Asian unity'. He said they should band together to make the Western-dominated world trade system a 'fair regime for all'. 'We must learn to rely on each other and reinforce ... inter-Asian trade'.54

Ultimately, Thaksin has little interest in either nationalism or Asian regionalism. These ideas are simply devices he uses to articulate his political and economic ambitions, but they do not reflect any obvious coherence of thought.

Social contract
At times, Thaksin's language starts to resemble that of former Philippine president Joseph Estrada. Asked to withdraw from the 2001 elections because of the constitutional court case, Thaksin replied:

'Ve must learn to rely on each other and reinforce ... inter-Asian trade'.54

At a closed seminar of concerned academics, activists and journalists held to discuss the Thaksin phenomenon in January 2004, it was argued that Thaksin was adopting a paternalistic approach to government:
Citizens become clients who are made to queue up to receive handouts from Thaksin. The majority of villagers eligible for Village Development Funds believe their approved loans came out of Thakin's own pocket instead of the government's coffers.61

This blurring of the distinction between the government, the state and the person of the prime minister was epitomized by a television commercial to promote the government's poverty registration programme. The commercial showed a poor family listening to the radio and hearing the voice of Thaksin telling them that he would be able to clear their debts. The commercial was criticized by some observers as pure propaganda, which had no place in a democratic society.57 However, the creator of the advertisement explained that 'his creative concept was to use the transistor radio as a medium between the prime minister and the public because he was inspired by the popularity of the prime minister's weekly radio programme every Saturday'. Ideas such as the 'social contract' were examples of 'creative concepts' developed by Thaksin's marketing department for promotional purposes. They had nothing to do with his real approach to governing Thailand.

Marketing
Somkid Jatsuripitak, Thaksin's first finance minister, played a key role in drafting the party's policy platform and developing electoral strategies.58 Through marketing and surveys, he and his team worked out how to respond to the wishes of rural voters. Researchers had travelled to villages all over Thailand to establish the concerns of the electorate.59 Thai Rak Thai's marketing strategy was strongly influenced by the experience of British political parties, 'the archetypal practitioners of political marketing'.60

Jennifer Lees-Marsam, a British academic specialist on political marketing, dispensed with using traditional political science approaches to classifying political parties. Instead, she adapted the language and perspective of management studies to divide parties into three types or orientations: product-oriented, sales-oriented and market-oriented.61 Product-oriented parties resembled those described by Panebianco as 'mass bureaucratic', with a focus on membership and party organization. Sales-oriented parties were typically parties whose product was in decline, 'trying to persuade voters that the party they had once identified with was still the one they should vote for.'62 By contrast, a market-oriented party was one that designed its behaviour to reflect voter preferences, first using market intelligence to identify the demands of the electorate.63 This was a description that precisely fitted Thai Rak Thai. She argued that many businesses moved through these three phases at different stages in their development, but that in the British context a market orientation now had the best chance of ensuring that a party could gain and retain power. At the same time, parties in power had to struggle to ensure that they remained market-oriented, since 'If a party wins power with a market-oriented product, over time it may remain convinced of its worth, and be unwilling to see it changed.'64 In other words, a market-oriented party had to be constantly studying changing market conditions and be ready to adapt its policies and presentation accordingly.

Kairrit Boonyakiat, head of Biophile Corporation, argued that Thai Rak Thai had created a textbook marketing campaign using a five-point strategy referred to as AIDAS: 'awareness, interest, design, action and satisfaction.' The first stage involved promoting brand awareness and associating the party name with populist policy ideas such as the debt moratorium, Village Development Fund and 30-baht healthcare scheme. These policies were used to attract the interest of potential voters. A design was then introduced to firm up that interest, using a colourful logo and images of the party leader. 'Action' came with the election itself and the opportunity to cast votes for the new party, while satisfaction would come later once the policies took effect. The party also carefully segmented its marketing, targeting practical programmes at rural voters, but emphasizing Thaksin's leadership qualities for the urban electorate:

Other parties also tried to bank on advertising and PR. But their tools were not good enough. They might have had the
money, but they did not know how to spend it. Thai Rak Thai had both the money and the tactics. The image of the product was also good. Its PR style was hard-hitting.\textsuperscript{65}

Krairit argued that Thai Rak Thai had created one of the best marketing campaigns seen in Thailand in recent years. The only drawback with such a campaign was that its very success raised enormous expectations, and delivering ‘satisfaction’ would require successful follow-up, otherwise a ‘harsh backlash’ could follow.

Ogilvy and Mather’s Witawat Jayapani argued that consistency had been the key to Thai Rak Thai’s success, creating a ‘brand personality’ for both party and leader. Advertising agency SC Matchbox, a Shin Corp subsidiary, had played a key role in creating the brand. At its heart was the ‘think new, act new’ campaign which reflected the idea of a new generation of leadership. Another key element was Thai Rak Thai’s success in differentiating itself from other parties, along with using communications ‘in an integrated and complete fashion, out-performing and out-financing all the other parties’. Offers such as the 30-baht healthcare scheme were highly effective. ‘In effect, the message sent out was that if you voted for me, you would get these rewards. It was a sales promotion’.

The general manager of Amway (Thailand), Preecha Prakobit, argued that Thai Rak Thai worked quite differently from its own direct sales methods. Whereas Amway began by using personal contacts to develop sales, only later employing mass media, Thai Rak Thai emulated the local direct sales company Mistine by promoting expensive media campaigns before sending out direct sales personnel to the local level. Preecha observed that Thai Rak Thai put considerable efforts into person-to-person communications and gained benefits from activities such as sponsoring community football matches.

Although political marketing often gets a bad press, Lees-Marshment insisted that it should not be confused with populism:

\textit{[P]olitical marketing is often seen as aiding populism, but Smith and Saunders (1990: 298) argue that the perspective

of populism is short-term and is in fact rooted in the selling era. If a party kept switching issues or offered inconsistent or impracticable product designs (Smith and Saunders (1990: 299) give the example of reduced taxation and increased public spending and thus ‘voodoo economics’) it would destroy the party’s credibility.\textsuperscript{66}

This opens up an interesting set of questions in relation to Thaksin and Thai Rak Thai: did the party adopt a sales orientation in the countryside, emphasizing the populist orientation, and a marketing orientation in urban areas? Was there actually a contradiction between two major elements of the Thai Rak Thai approach? A further issue also emerges from this analysis:

The rise of a market-oriented party nonetheless raises important normative questions, because the basic idea of a market orientation is to follow, rather than lead, voter demands. It implies that conviction politics is over.\textsuperscript{67}

Such an argument implies that Thaksin’s approach to politics contains a fundamental contradiction: is it driven by the market and crafted by focus groups, or is it about strong visionary leadership? Clearly, Thai Rak Thai would like to have it both ways. Arguably, Thaksin is not simply a market leader, but also a political salesman. Lees-Marshment recognizes that her arguments apply with more force to Britain than to other countries, and that market-oriented parties may be less appropriate in different kinds of society. She cites the example of Silvio Berlusconi’s Forza Italia, which she argues combined elements of marketing, sales and product orientation.\textsuperscript{68}

Writing in \textit{Krunthep Thavarikt},Attachak Satayanurak argued that the populism of Thai Rak Thai reflected a strategy to dominate the political process:

In the beginning, make people so thrilled by the policy that they believe that the party works for the impoverished or majority of the nation. From there, try to make the society feel that there are enemies trying to undermine the country
and that they or their colleagues are the only ones defending the country from those enemies. Eventually he (the prime minister) and his colleagues become the individuals who speak and act on the behalf of the people and the nation.

The populist dictatorship will generate disputes and the other side of the disputes will be blamed as the enemy of the nation and society. This condition gives populist dictatorship the legitimacy to crush the enemy for the sake of safeguarding the nation, with the consent of people who believe they will benefit from the state in future.69

Thai Rak Thai's populist policies were the subject of both domestic and international criticism, and Thaksin came under considerable scrutiny from the regional press in the run up to the election, when both the Straits Times and the Asian Wall Street Journal questioned both his policies and his fitness for office.70 The Journal compared him to the grasshopper in Aesop's fable – playing all summer and then starving, in contrast to 'worker ant' Chuan Leekpai of the Democrats. Thai Rak Thai responded by implying that the newspaper was biased in favour of the Democrats, a charge the Journal strongly rejected.71

THAKSIN AND THE MEDIA

The Thai media is typically quick to applaud new political parties and initiatives, and Thaksin benefited from a long press honeymoon which lasted from the founding of the party in 1998 until well into his first year of office. By regional standards, Thailand has a remarkably free print media, though electronic media have long been subject to government control and interference. At the same time, the Thai press is highly partisan, and some elements of the press are only too willing to do the bidding of wealthy powerholders. As McCargo has noted, it would be dangerous to assume that a relatively outspoken and vigorous Thai media can be equated with an effective and critical media.72 As a media magnate himself, Thaksin was well placed to cultivate good relations with reporters. In his earlier political roles, he had been well known for hosting dinners and parties for the media. During his time as foreign minister in the first Chuan government, he was briefly embroiled in controversy following a party at which he gave out free mobile phones to reporters covering the foreign desk beat. After complaints to the Reporters' Association of Thailand, all the phones were returned. Thaksin's Shinawatra Group also gave out free gold necklaces hidden in pieces of cake at a business reporters' party in December 1995.73 While Thaksin used similar 'carrot' approaches to curry favour with the media after the founding of Thai Rak Thai, he also used a range of 'sticks' to discourage critical reporting and dissent. As Kavi Chongkitakorn put it:

Thaksin's spin team, with part of its staff mapping out strategies in Government House, designs news and plans newspaper headlines. Filers and tips are placed to key reporters; the day's events and message are crafted in a way that is new to Thailand.74

Thai Rak Thai was believed to use a 'media monitoring centre' in the office of the government spokesman to rate newspapers columns and articles as 'supportive', 'critical' or 'misleading' according to their level of support for the government – and marking hostile columns with a 'bomb' symbol.75 The energies devoted by Thaksin and his advisory team to media 'spin' and management reflected the importance he attached to effective communication with the voters, which he placed at the heart of his priorities.

A clear indication of Thaksin's real attitude to the media emerged just before the 2001 elections, when Shin Corp purchased a controlling interest in ITV, an 'independent' television station with a reputation for strong and critical news coverage. More than 20 of the more outspoken ITV journalists were immediately fired; there was a general perception that scrutiny of Thai Rak Thai was subsequently toned down. Thaksin adopted a strategy of forming financial and other connections with leading daily newspapers, most of which were notably muted in their criticisms. Exceptions included the Nation Group – with both English and Thai language dailies, as well as broadcasting interests – which adopted a consistently sceptical
view of the prime minister and his party, and the small, combative daily *Thai Post*. In 2002 it emerged that the Anti Money Laundering Organization had been investigating the financial affairs of the outspoken Nation Group editor-in-chief Suthichai Yoon and other senior executives of the company. While the government strongly denied that these investigations were politically motivated—and swiftly dropped the proceedings—the moves seemed like a crude attempt to intimidate critical voices. Nation editor Pana Janviroj argued that such investigations could not have been instigated without orders from above.76 Ironically, AMLO was one of the new bodies introduced after 1997 in order to clean up Thai public life.

In August 2001, the Special Branch issued a warning letter to the business daily *Krunthep Tharakit* (part of the Nation Group), accusing the newspaper of irresponsible behaviour and of acting in a way that could have affected international confidence in Thaksin and might create disorder in the nation.77 The crime committed by the newspaper was publishing a translated version of a Reuters report, saying that the prime minister might be banned from politics for 16 months if found guilty of assets concealment by the Constitution Court. The action testified to a degree of anxiety—bordering on paranoia—about the assets case. In the few weeks prior to the assets hearings, the Thai Broadcasting Journalists' Association documented no less than 14 cases of government interference in the news content of state-owned broadcasting outlets.78 Chulalongkorn University academic Wilasinee Phipitkul commented on the fact that virtually all media reports of the assets trial were the same, apparently all derived from supporters of the prime minister.79 Around the same time, the government spokesman announced that journalists would only be able to talk to government ministers with formal appointments, and that their interviews would be taped to make sure reports were accurate.80 Neither of these measures lasted long.

At the beginning of 2002, Thaksin declared that he would limit the interviews he gave to the media to one or two structured occasions each week, rather than responding to questions whenever ambushed by reporters.81 The decision reflected his growing awareness that he was prone to making serious gaffes in off-the-cuff remarks, as reflected in the nickname 'Misguided billionaire', which he was given by a group of Government House reporters on 1 January 2002. At the same time, press criticism of Thaksin over issues such as interfering in the state-owned media or his sarcastic jibes at academics did not arise because of such faux pas—they reflected real concerns about his policies and attitudes. Thaksin was just as likely to put his foot in it in the privacy of his radio studio as when he was waylaid by a pack of reporters.

Opposition politicians seized upon issues such as the AMLO investigation into Nation Group executives as evidence of Thaksin's growing preoccupation with maintaining absolute power.82 However, his party spokesman, Suranan Vejajiva, argued that Thaksin—who had only recently entered politics following a private sector career—was simply being misunderstood:

> When he works, he thinks more in terms of efficiency, in terms of getting things done. ... He's trying to say, 'Don't criticize me yet. Let me finish my work.' But some members of the media are not giving him a chance. And he finds that frustrating because he comes from a world where there was not much criticism.

Suranan went on to assert that Thaksin simply 'needs to explain himself more clearly'. The Thai Journalists' Association begged to differ, declaring 2001 'The Year of Media Intimidation'. In March 2002, 374 academics and over a thousand journalists signed petitions criticizing the government's attitude towards the media. The petition by journalists was the largest of its kind since 1973.

By late 2003, freedom of expression was clearly facing a range of threats in Thaksin's Thailand. On 1 January 2003, Nation Group reporters at Government House dubbed Thaksin an untouchable 'demigod' presiding over an 'illusory' government. The appellation reflected Thaksin's growing reputation for making headlines by denouncing his critics.83 In a statement published at the end of 2003, the Thai Journalists' Association described 2003 as a year in which...
they had been reined in: 'The interference in the work of the Thai media has grown more complicated and subtle and is continuing to eat into the mechanism of the media.' Kavi Chongkittakorn, a senior editor at the Nation group, argued that having failed to reform itself, the Thai media was now being 'tamed and co-opted' by the Thaksin government. He declared that '[News] publishers are now the biggest prostitutes in town.' Alongside this co-optation process, dissenting voices were being silenced. The critical Philippine academic Walden Bello, a long-time Thai resident affiliated with Chulalongkorn University, was unable to obtain a visa to enter the country at the time of the October 2003 APEC meeting. Supinya Klangnarong, secretary-general of the Campaign for Media Reform and a leading campaigner for free speech, was sued for civil libel by Shin Corporation over comments in Thai Post newspaper in July 2003 in which she claimed that the company had benefited from government policies. Shin Corporation also sued three editors of Thai Post over claims that Thai Rak Thai policies had aimed at boosting Shin Corporation's businesses.

The Committee for the Protection of Journalists also noted that television news anchors had uncritically repeated the government line throughout the 2003 'war on drugs,' repeatedly announcing without scepticism that the [more than 2000] deaths were the result of gang feuds. Meanwhile, critical voices claiming that the deaths resulted from extra-judicial killings went unreported or were banished to inside pages; nor was there any substantive investigative coverage of the issue.

Ubonrat Siriyuwasak noted that after Thaksin came to power, all independent political talk-show hosts on television and radio ... have had their contracts cancelled and their programmes removed from the airwaves.

With iTV under Shin Corp's wing, Thaksin now controls all television networks, including the state-controlled channels 3, 5, 7, 9 and 11, as well as nationwide radio stations operated by government agencies. Saturating the air waves with one-way communication is turning state-controlled media into propaganda machines.

Thaksin's Deputy Interior Minister Pracha Maleenont came from the family which had long controlled the popular Channel 3. When a Channel 3 Government House reporter, Kasem San Ayothaya, produced some critical coverage of Thai Rak Thai, the station removed him and his crew from their beat, on the basis that they had been 'disrespectful to the prime minister and his aides.' From late 2003, Thaksin's Army Command cousin Chaisit Shinawatra oversaw Channel 5 and dozens of radio frequencies owned by the army. The gradual disappearance of critical voices from the airwaves was a slow but inexorable process that occasionally made headlines. Early on, the popular presenters Fongsaman Chamonchan and Suriyong Huntasan were removed from the Public Relations' Department radio programme 'Bantung Satakan'; apparently because they were seen as unsympathetic to Thai Rak Thai.

Another good example was a spat between the government and Independent News Network (INN), which operated Ruam Duay Chuay Kan (Uniting to Help Each Other), a 24-hour phone-in news programme on 96 FM that served as an information lifeline for taxi drivers and other Bangkokians. INN found itself in hot water after broadcasting an interview in which former Interior Minister Purachai Piumsomboon criticized Thaksin for removing him from his post as justice minister. The programme was abruptly taken off the air on 1 March 2003, provoking considerable public disquiet. In the event, normal service was restored three days later – but the episode was an important reminder that control of radio frequencies remained firmly in the hands of the military, which leased the airspace to programmers at its own pleasure and discretion. Thaksin himself denied that the Army's failure immediately to renew INN's lease was at all related to the Purachai interview controversy. To critical observers, however, this was a further example of the way in which a prime minister claiming to 'think new, act new' continued to adopt a very old and conservative approach to broadcast media. As Thepchai Yong...
pointed out, the original reasons for allocating radio frequencies to the military reflected the needs of the Cold War, and had long since been replaced by a web of clandestine financial deals and personal contacts. Despite his often-declared interest in introducing private sector efficiencies to areas previously dominated by the state, the Thaksin government had made little progress in reforming the anachronistic spoils system allowing the military to control radio broadcasting.

Thaksin demonstrated a deeply-held view that the press was in a conspiracy against him and ought to assume a different and more positive role:

Thaksin’s attitude toward the media seemed to be summed up in remarks he made to the press corps in May, following a visit to Europe to promote Thai trade relations. ‘You media people have to believe me’, he said. ‘Today, serving your country is more important than sending your news dispatches daily to your editors. Think before you do anything that damages the country.’

Ironically, this was an argument that many earlier Thai politicians had found persuasive, largely because of the tradition of a highly critical print media that typically berated all governments for their failings.

In January 2004, the media subcommittee of the National Human Rights Commission produced a report on the progress of media reform in 2003. While the report noted some minor steps forward – particularly the Administrative Court ruling that the methods used to selected members of the National Broadcasting Commission and the National Telecommunications Commission were invalid – the main findings were a depressing catalogue of government moves to undermine media independence. A prime example was the purchase of large numbers of shares in the Nation Multimedia Group by investors linked to Suriya Jungrungpreangkit, the Transport minister and secretary-general of Thai Rak Thai. Since the Nation Group had been particularly willing to criticize the ruling party and prime minister, this was a disturbing trend. The Committee to Protect Journalists claimed that Suriya’s relatives had purchased around 20 per cent of the company – more than twice as large a holding as the next two leading shareholders. They quoted Supinya Klangnarong of the Campaign for Media Reform as saying ‘This purchase is linked with political clout and that’s what makes us really worried.’ In similar fashion, newspapers that were seen as oppositional found themselves deprived of government-funded advertising. The Nation claimed that ‘if any newspaper should dare to report negatively on the government, Matchbox Co, the advertising arm of Shinawatra Corporation, will withdraw its advertisements without explanation.’ The Thai Journalists’ Association complained directly about these sorts of intervention in a statement marking World Press Freedom Day on 3 May 2004:

It is known to the public that the Thai government and members of the Cabinet are interfering in the media by using economic bargaining through government agencies’ advertising budget and stock acquisition, therefore, there is growing concern about the editorial independence being threatened by the political forces.

In February 2004, the editor of the Bangkok Post was forced to resign, a development widely linked to government pressure. This emphasis on targeting the English-language press reflected the pre-occupation of the Thaksin government with presenting a positive image to the outside world.

The beginning of 2004, however, saw a discernible shift in the climate of metropolitan opinion concerning Thaksin’s performance, and a resulting increase in media pressure. Episodes such as the government’s repeated but completely implausible denials over the existence of bird flu in Thailand’s chicken population and growing political and security problems in the deep South strained his ability to spin events in a positive light. As Suthichai Yoon noted, Thaksin had enjoyed a three year media honeymoon on the back of economic recovery. Suthichai summarized Thaksin’s attitudes to the
media in five principles. The first four principles were: treat the media as an enemy, deny everything negative, 'use angry language to threaten critics and scare off detractors', and avoid all discussions of perceptions, feelings and ethical standards. The fifth and final principle was:

Do the same thing over and over again, but expect different results. Every time a crisis breaks out, go on TV and the radio and say: 'I know every detail of this issue. It will be solved in two weeks'.

In other words, it was a strategy based on 'bluffing a way through' any given crisis. When this strategy failed, Thaksin tried another approach: the massive diversionary tactic. The bid to purchase Liverpool Football Club in May 2004 was a classic example of such a tactic, reflecting the advice given in Robert Greene's book *48 Laws of Power*, one of Somkid's favourites:

Draw attention to yourself by creating an unforgettable, even controversial image. Court scandal. Do anything to make yourself seem larger than life and shine more brightly than those around you.

By generating a huge debate about whether it was appropriate for Thaksin or Thailand to buy a major stake in a British football club, the prime minister succeeded in displacing violence in the South and a parliamentary no-confidence debate from the front pages of the newspapers, and replacing substantive issues with an essentially spurious issue of his own devising. The Liverpool story was just the latest example of such tactics. At a seminar organized by the Thai Broadcast Journalists Association in November 2003, Thakereng Somsap complained that Thaksin systematically diverted attention away from corruption issues and towards the war on drugs and on influential people. He even suggested that the prime minister had delayed his cabinet reshuffle for two weeks in order to capitalize on reports about an alleged murder. There was a pattern here of government attempts to determine the news agenda, closely emulating the tactics of media masters Tony Blair and Bill Clinton.

**THAKSIN AND THE INTERNATIONAL MEDIA**

Thaksin Shinawatra’s unease with the international media became evident long before he actually entered Government House. The feud really began with the publication of a short piece in *Time* magazine by Robert Horn. The article discussed some of Thaksin’s previous political debacles, including his two unsuccessful spells as deputy prime minister, and observed that despite his claim to be a leader for the digital age, he was allied with some old-style ‘analogue’ politicians. At the same time, the headline reflected a view that Thaksin was putting the past behind him and mounting a strong bid for the premiership. The article was translated into Thai by *Matichon*, and produced critical responses from Thai Rak Thai figures, notably from party spokesman Suranan Vejajiva. Suranan criticized the article for containing factual inaccuracies, but never produced any convincing examples of these. He also criticized the ‘foreign intellectuals’ quoted in the article, saying, for example, that Duncan McCargo was an admirer of Chamlong Srimuang – and so might blame Thaksin for destroying the Palang Dharma Party – but ‘Thais knew better’. Pongthep Tepkarnchana, deputy secretary-general of Thai Rak Thai, similarly criticized foreign intellectuals for their inability to understand Thailand properly. Thaksin himself complained that the Thai press focused on the phrase ‘analogue knight’ (asawin analog), which never appeared in the original *Time* article, but became a kind of local media shorthand for a set of criticisms about him. Simply put, the controversy over the *Time* article was not really about the substance of the original article, but reflected the way in which the Horn piece allowed local media to revisit longstanding criticisms of Thaksin.

Relations with the international media grew more strained after Thaksin took office, especially in relation to the widely-read weekly regional newsmagazine *Far Eastern Economic Review*. Unlike most
other Bangkok-based foreign correspondents, Review correspondents were Thailand specialists with longstanding networks of contacts; most of them also spoke Thai. But a short 175 word article published by the Review in January 2002 generated uproar. The piece touched upon tensions between the palace and Government House and alluded to the royal family's business activities. The offending issue of the magazine was banned in Thailand, swiftly disappearing from newsstands and Thai Airways flights. On 23 February the two Bangkok correspondents of the magazine - Shawn Crispin and Rodney Tasker - had their visas suspended; moves were then made to deport them as a threat to national security. This was an extraordinary development: no foreign journalist had been expelled from the Thailand since the authoritarian dark days of the 1977 Thainin government. Only following a letter of apology from the Review's publishers did an immigration panel reverse an earlier decision to deport the two foreign correspondents. The magazine never retracted the substance of the story. While Thaksin and his ministers repeatedly insisted that the moves against the two correspondents were not politically motivated, few believed them. Informed sources suggest that the decision not to expel the pair followed a specific request from the palace. In a separate development, the 2-8 March 2002 issue of The Economist - containing a 15-page special feature section on Thailand - was withdrawn from circulation, following concerns that it made inappropriate references to the monarchy.

Capitalizing on the nationalist mood of the moment, Thaksin declared that if journalists came to destroy Thailand he would consider them persona non grata, whatever their race or nationality. The irony here was striking: Thaksin, the Western-educated, globalizing telecommunications magnate had adopted a hard-line reactionary approach to the international media. A few weeks later, the prime minister seemed to have mellowed slightly, telling Review reporters in a fence-mending interview that his enemies were plotting to topple him by stirring up trouble in the eyes of the public. This talk of dirty tricks and a media conspiracy was distressingly familiar and echoed similar claims by his much less sophisticated predecessors.

Banham Silpa-arha and Chavalit Yongchaiyuddh. On the one hand, Thaksin and those around him were highly attentive to the advice, analyses and commentaries of foreigners - primarily Americans - yet on the other hand they developed an antagonistic relationship with the international media.

THAKSIN AND HIS CRITICS

2003 began with a blistering attack on Thaksin by Thirayuth Boonni, his most persistent critic. A former student leader from the 1970s, Thirayuth had pursued an unconventional academic career following his appointment as a sociology lecturer at Thammasat University. An intriguing combination of public intellectual and newsmaker, he used newspaper columns and a stream of slim paperbacks on catchy themes to promote critical views of Thai society and politics. No one could accuse Thirayuth of harbouring a particular animus against Thaksin; in the past, he had been extremely critical of Chuan Leekpai and other politicians. Where Thirayuth outshone other Thai social critics was in his remarkable boldness, his willingness to speak his own version of truth directly unto power. While most journalists and academics initially held back from head-to-head confrontation with Thaksin, Thirayuth taunted the businessman-turned-prime minister remorselessly from the outset. At the same time, Thirayuth was an academic loner, a skilled maker of enemies. Thaksin had little to fear from such attacks; yet by dignifying his criticisms with detailed and sometimes venomous responses, the prime minister actually turned Thirayuth into a much bigger problem than was necessary.

Thai Rak Thai went to considerable lengths to counter Thirayuth's analysis of Thaksin. The Nation published a 1,000 word rebuttal by Suranan Vejjija of Thirayuth's latest criticisms of the prime minister. Suranan countered that Thirayuth himself was abusing the media:

Thirayuth's work could have been accorded with more serious consideration if he hadn't tried too hard with his gimmicks to attract public attention through coinage of
words like 'Thaksinisation' and 'Thaksinocracy'. As such, his analysis cannot be called a piece of academic work because it is clearly biased against Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Thirayuth has chosen wrongly to 'sell' his analysis to a mass audience and to manipulate the mass media, most of whom decided to go along with sensationalism, leading to a distortion of facts. It's a pity that members of the public do not benefit as much as they should from the analysis.110

The problem with this kind of response – whether from Thaksin himself or from one of his lieutenants – was that it seemed to dignify the prime minister's critics, creating the impression that he had been really riled by the statements of a single university lecturer. Surely a man of Thaksin's immense power and status ought to have been above such petty considerations? When Thirayuth launched an even more venomous diatribe against Thaksin in July 2004, calling him a 'monstrous baby' surrounded by 'Thaksinocronies',111 Thaksin managed to contain himself, saying that he appreciated the fact that Thirayuth only criticized him once a year.

In January 2004, a group of academics and critics gathered over a weekend in Chiang Mai to discuss critical perspectives on the government's performance. Thaksin's emphasis on controlling the media was one of the topics under discussion, along with the government's populist programmes, conflicts of interest and cronyism.112 However, the closed-door meeting soon made headline news and papers circulated among participants were summarized in detail in Matichon newspaper. Some participants were concerned that there might be reprisals as a result.

The January gathering was a taste of things to come, however. In April 2004, senator, broadcaster and former Thammasat University economist Chermsak Pinthong, published an edited collection entitled Ru Tan Thaksin [Staying One Step Ahead of Thaksin].113 Contributors included some very well-known names: Kasem Srisampham, Thirayuth Boonmi, Ubonrat Siriyuvassak, Pasuk Pongpiahichit, Chermsak Pinthong, Somkiat Tangkritvanich, Sulak Sivaraksa and Prawase Wasi. The book sold 45,000 copies in its first two weeks, demonstrating the demand for critical perspectives on Thaksin as an antidote to the hagiographic volumes that had been filling bookstore shelves and windows. The inclusion of Sulak and Prawase, two of Thailand's most famous public intellectuals, was highly significant – not least because both had expressed support for Thaksin around the time of the 2001 election. As Sulak put it in his contribution:

Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, whom this writer and other well-meaning members of civil society supported when he first came to office because his policies appeared to be pro-poor, has shown himself to be a conceited, intolerant, dictatorial ruler, who has no respect for democratic values, good governance, or the rule of law.

Thaksin lost no time in showing his true colours. He made enemies of anyone with dissenting views, particularly academics, intellectuals, non-governmental organisations and civil society.114

The book was edited by elected senator, prominent broadcaster and former Thammasat University economist Chermsak Pinthong, who had been banished from the airwaves by forces loyal to Thaksin and his party. Staying One Step Ahead of Thaksin was marketed as a 'citizen's handbook' to shed light on the prime minister's policies and methods. Asked to explain the popularity of the book, Chermsak responded:

'The enjoyment of this book is not unlike the pleasure one derives from watching a classic Thai soap opera on TV. The fact that one already has intimate and detailed knowledge of every twist and turn of the whole plot does not detract one from the sort of emotional involvement and personal identification with the protagonist.'

'For example, in Baan Sai Thong (an all-time favourite romance of Thai women) everybody knows how the protagonist is taken in by an aristocratic household as a lowly dependent but eventually works her way up to become the undisputed owner of the huge estate,' Chermsak explains with a strong hint of irony.115
A second volume of critical articles on Thaksin, also edited by Chermak, was launched in August 2004. Ru Tham Thaksin 2 included 16 contributors, notably the leading economist, Ammar Siames, Thammasat political scientists, Seksan Prasertkul and Kasian Tejapira, and the distinguished retired diplomat, Asada Chainam.116

As 2004 wore on, Thaksin's critics became increasingly vocal, incensed by a variety of issues ranging from the Liverpool Football Club debacle to the shenanigans at Channel 5 and the EGAT privatization controversy—not to mention the political violence in the South and the re-emergence of bird flu. Thaksin's honeymoon was over; and spats between politicians and critical academics and commentators were nothing new in Thailand. What was striking, however, was the extreme venom of the exchanges, which had become highly personalized. Thailand's public intellectuals felt that the government was treating them with barely-disguised contempt, while Thaksin seemed completely incapable of tolerating any form of critical scrutiny.

CONCLUSION
Thaksin was in certain respects a new sort of Thai politician, with a completely new understanding of marketing, media and language. In this respect, his approach to politics owed more to consummate professional politicians such as Blair and Clinton than to any of his Thai predecessors. He sought to tell stories to the Thai electorate, spinning forth new initiatives on a weekly basis. Yet the irony was that Thaksin Shinawatra was no Tony Blair: he lacked the easy command of language that is the hallmark of the natural politician. Herein lay Thaksin's problem. The relentless use of language by someone who struggles constantly with his own lack of fluency all too easily produces a shrill tone, a hectoring didacticism. And instead of engaging in a dialogical relationship with the language of others—the languages of political opponents, of rivals, critics, journalists and pundits—this mode of language degenerates rapidly into monologue. Monologue of this kind requires a monopoly of the means of communication, since to ensure that it is always heard, other voices must be turned down or simply silenced. Lack of fluency in a weak individual breeds nervousness and hesitancy, but in a strong and powerful individual such as Thaksin, it can produce an overconfident raising of the voice.

Since the growth of critical voices during 2004, Thaksin's radio programmes have changed their tone. He is less prone to responding to critics or extemporizing on hobbyhorse issues. He appears instead to be sticking more closely to a structured script that concentrates on what he and his government have been doing 'for the people'. Towards the end, he starts to seem hurried, apologizing that although he still has many issues to talk about, he will have to drop some of them. For a while, he began using the broadcasts to respond directly to public petitions complaining of wrongdoing.

Thaksin has grasped the central problem of contemporary politics—the need to communicate directly and personally with citizens and voters. His weekly radio programme is an impressive testament to this understanding. But in an open society, that communication needs to involve listening as well as speaking: political discourse must form part of a dialogue, however unsatisfactory, between the ruled and their rulers.117 Once dialogue (or at least the illusion of dialogue) ends, the democratic spell is broken. Thai prime ministers do not need to engage in dialogue with the electorate—they can operate perfectly well through backroom deals, money politics and a range of other tactics and strategies. Even if dialogue falters between Thaksin and the citizens of Thailand, he may be able to remain in power for some considerable time. But it would be a shame if he allowed the dialogue he appeared to establish with the people during his early time in office to break down, and to be replaced by a dull and dangerous sermonizing. To pursue the analogy with marketing, Thaksin needs to ensure that he responds to the changing demands of consumers and respects their concerns about the direction of Thai Rak Thai. Should he fail to do so, Thai Rak Thai could revert to the more familiar product or sales oriented mode of political party. Thaksin is then likely to experience a
gradual but inexorable loss of support, as Thailand's notoriously fickle voters become bored with his image and his promises.

NOTES
1 It later emerged that the author was political journalist Joe Klein.
5 Fairclough is a leading proponent of a sociolinguistic approach known as critical discourse analysis, which focuses on the way in which language is used and discursive strategies constructed. Savitri Gadavanij has applied such an approach to the study of Thai political language; examining the case of parliamentary no-confidence debates in the second half of the 1990s, she argues that the language used in these debates is carefully constructed to bridge the discrepancy between the formal and hidden agendas of the speakers. See Savitri Gadavanij, 'Discursive strategies for political survival: a critical discourse analysis of Thai no-confidence debates', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Leeds, 2003.
7 Fairclough, New Labour, p. 96.
8 Cited in Fairclough, New Labour, p. 98.
10 Klein describes an episode where Clinton had to ad-lib part of a major speech when the wrong text was loaded into a teleprompter, an experience Clinton claimed to have enjoyed. Klein, The Natural, pp. 83–84.
12 As Thepchai Yong puts it: ‘of course, nobody cares to tell us whether it is being done voluntarily or on somebody’s order’. ‘Media reform is looking increasingly remote’, The Nation, 23 December 2003.
14 The Nation, 5 February 2002.

Thaksin's Political Discourse
16 The Nation, 2 January 2004.
17 The Nation, 23 August 2002.
18 Sophon Ongkara, 'Why is Thaksin hiding from the House?' The Nation, 3 March 2002.
20 Quoted in Bangkok Post, 2 December 2001.
26 The Nation, 8 August 2003.
29 New Straits Times, 10 July 2003.
31 The Nation, 11 May 2003.
34 The Nation, 2 July 2003.
36 Investors’ Digest (Malaysia), 16 February 2002.
37 The Nation, 21 August 2003.
39 Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, ‘The Only Good Populist is a Rich Populist’, Thaksin Shinawatra and Thailand’s Democracy, Southeast Asia Research Centre Working Papers Series No. 36, Hong Kong, Southeast Asia Research Centre, City University of Hong Kong, 2002, p. 11.
40 The Nation, 10 January 2002.
41 See Duncan McCargo, ‘Populism and reformism in contemporary Thailand, South East Asia Research, 9, 1, 2001, pp. 89–107.
42 McCargo, Chamlong Srimuang, pp. 198–204.
54 Associated Press, 12 April 2002.
57 The Nation, 23 January 2004
CHAPTER 6

Thaksin’s New Political Economy Networks

The videotape stunned a nation. A senior intelligence chief was seen handing over $15,000 in cash to an opposition politician, in an attempt to ensure that a certain candidate became the president of parliament. The political fallout culminated in the head of the government fleeing the country, later resigning by fax.

A MAJOR SCANDAL WHICH BROKE in Peru in September 2000 revealed that President Alberto Fujimori’s intelligence advisor and confidante Vladimiro Montesino had created an elaborate benefit-sharing network, which incorporated bankers, journalists and the leaders of opposition parties.² Crucial exchanges between these actors were captured on the ‘Vladideos’, a series of recordings of secret meetings held at the headquarters of the National Intelligence Secretariat. Luis Moreno Ocampo argued that only by using the idea of power networks was it possible to understand how favours and resources are really allocated in a political system such as Peru’s, characterized by a small elite with complex interlocking interests. Montesino acquired personal control over a range of government agencies, staffing them with longstanding friends and old classmates. Ocampo cites a study by Jean Cartier Bresson, who cautions that mutually beneficial relationships between political interest groups and other well-connected bodies can undermine democratic norms and principles: behind a façade of constitutional democracy, real power may lie in the hands of well-networked elites.³ Bresson defined such networks as follows: