

Populism and reformism in contemporary Thailand

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This paper argues that two main strands of populist thinking emerged in Thailand in the wake of the 1997 economic crisis. One was a kind of resurgent nationalism, which sought to blame the West – particularly international institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF – for Thailand's problems, criticizing globalization and the imperialist designs of the G7 to subordinate Thailand to economic colonialism. A second form of populist sentiment was based on critiques of the Thai development path of capitalist industrialization, and of Thailand's increasing integration into the world economy; the result was a discourse of localism, emphasizing the need for return to agrarian roots. Some populist arguments drew freely on both these dominant strains of discourse. The paper acknowledges that perhaps neither discourse was truly populist, in the sense that 'the people' were not clearly invoked, and that post-1997 Thai populism quite closely resembled official Thai nationalism, replete with elitist and statist rhetoric. Nevertheless, it is possible to make a strong case for the use of this term in the Thai context, stressing the extent to which localist responses to the crisis were traditional, conservative, and nostalgic, emphasizing agriculture, criticizing industrialization, and denouncing exploitation by outsiders. The power of these discourses lay in their syncretism, blending elements of standard official nationalism with an implicit, highly romanticized evocation of khon Thai (Thai people) as village-dwelling farmers, buffeted by the storms of global capitalism.

Introduction

Two large conferences staged in Pattaya in December 1999 nicely symbolized the current rhetorical preoccupations of Thailand's political élites and public intellectuals. On 10–12 December there was the staging of the first ever Congress of King Prajadhipok's Institute, entitled 'On Politics and the Management of Change in Thai Society at the Commencement of the Next Century'. The Institute, a 'semi-independent organization under the supervision of the Speaker of the House of

Representatives' had close personal and official ties with the political reformers who had inspired the new constitution of 1997: it was, in effect, the think-tank of Thai constitutionalism. The following weekend, a couple of miles down the road at Jomtien Beach, the Thailand Development Research Institute (TDRI) held its annual conference, taking as its theme 'The Self-Sufficiency Economy' (*sethaki po piang*). TDRI was the well-established think-tank of Thai economic development and technocracy: most of its leading lights were Western-educated economists and social scientists who had been prominent advocates of rapid industrialization. One of the sponsors of the TDRI conference was the royal charity, the Chai Patana Foundation.

Siam's absolute monarchy was brought to an end by a palace revolution in 1932, but it was replaced by an élite-dominated order in which the military often played the leading role. For the past twenty years, Thai politics has been highly commercialized and exclusionary. Vote-buying and other abuses of the electoral system are widespread, political parties are little more than business enterprises, and politicians are held in low public esteem.

One response to this parlous state of affairs was a movement for political reform, which culminated in the promulgation of the 1997 constitution. Reformists argued that Thailand's political and social order could be overhauled through legal, bureaucratic, and structural changes that checked abuses of power by elected politicians and unelected officials alike. The new constitution had three main elements: changes in the electoral system intended to reduce vote-buying and other abuses, and institutional reforms to introduce a separation of powers between party-list MPs (intended to serve as ministers) and constituency MPs; the creation of a set of independent bodies to oversee the electoral process, tackle corruption, and defend the constitution; and some limited moves to enhance popular rights and increase accountability and transparency (for details see Connors, 1999; McCargo, unpublished).

However, the currency crisis and economic turmoil that began in 1997 also helped generate more populist ideas about the curing of Thailand's woes. Longstanding notions of community culture (based on an idealized view of the Thai village) were recycled, this time combined with a knee-jerk nationalism based on resentment against the West in general, and against the IMF in particular. These notions were fuelled by the King's birthday speech of 5 December 1997, in which he sketched out a populist, Buddhist vision of a more self-sufficient Thai economy.

It is argued here that reformism and populism are two contradictory

but nevertheless overlapping discourses, which serve both to shape and to confuse public debate about the direction of Thailand's social and political order.

Political reform

Thailand (previously Siam) has been engaged in a near-continuous process of political reform since the late nineteenth century. Reform during the Fifth Reign (1868–1910), epitomized by royal decrees such as that of May 1874, reflected attempts to shore up the existing order, 'modernizing' institutions and structures without undermining the substantive political powers of the absolute monarchy. Historians such as Wyatt have praised the efforts of the monarchy to transform Siam in the late nineteenth century:

If there is a single thread running consistently through this long period, it is the insistent presence of the king, who was his country's most devastating critic, its gadfly prophet, its guiding spirit through a revolutionary epoch in world history. (Wyatt, 1969:385)

Yet revisionist scholarship has stressed that such reforms were essentially conservative in nature: Thai reform was at heart a means of preventing change, rather than a method of implementing change. As Thak notes, the 'modernization' of the Fifth Reign 'could be viewed as the attempts of the monarchy to establish means to consolidate its own weak position' (Thak, 1979:xvi), and was thus more a matter of firming up the monarchical institution than strengthening the nation as a whole. Crucially, 'reform' came from above, the result of a lofty benediction rather than a struggle from below. Anderson criticized the very idea that the Siamese monarchy engaged in 'modernizing' reforms. For him, the form of modernization introduced by King Chulalongkorn resembled the kind of reforms implemented by colonial regimes in other parts of South East Asia (Anderson, 1978:199). He went on to note that:

'Royalism' in the sense of an active quest for real power in the political system by the royal family . . . persists in a curiously antique form in contemporary Siam. (Anderson, 1978:209)

One of the central tenets legitimizing royalism was the claim that the Chakri dynasty had saved Siam from being colonized, and so had preserved the country's independence.

Since the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932, the discourse of reform

has been an invaluable cloak for power-struggles at the elite level, particularly between military officers and senior bureaucrats, and more recently between permanent officials and elected representatives. Processes of political reform have generated sixteen constitutions since 1932, many of them implemented to legitimate new regimes which had recently gained power as the result of military coups. Each successive new regime sought to shore up its power by initiating a reform process, changing constitutional and often electoral arrangements. But political reform was much more often about shoring up a new version of the status quo than about ushering in a genuinely changed political order. Examples include the 1952 Constitution introduced by Phibun, and Thanom's 1968 Constitution. As Kobkua (1999) has shown, royalism continued to flourish: the monarchy has repeatedly exerted direct political influence on pivotal political events, such as those of October 1973, October 1976, April 1981, and May 1992.

The context of Thai political reform in the 1990s

Prior to 1991, it was widely assumed and argued that Thailand was making a gradual but successful democratic transition. No successful military coup had taken place since 1977; parliament and political parties seemed to be gaining in power and influence; and there was considerable evidence that elected politicians (supported by the mainly Sino-Thai business community) were edging military officers and bureaucrats out of their traditional spheres of dominance. While many saw these trends as positive, not everyone was so sure. Soldiers and bureaucrats felt threatened by the rise of new political groups which were undermining their customary pre-eminence; and there was genuine public unease at the degree to which the electoral process was becoming commercialized, and the extent to which politicians (especially under the post-1988 Chatichai Choonavan) were over-indulging at the cabinet buffet table.

The military coup of 23 February 1991 brought these concerns into sharp focus (for a discussion, see McCargo, 1992). Despite the supposed democratization of Thailand, the coup met with very little public opposition, certainly not from Thailand's much-vaunted 'new middle class'. While the real motives for the coup appear to have been pure ambition on the part of the military leadership, the official rationale struck a chord with many Thais. The five-point rationale for the coup accused the Chatichai government of: rampant corruption, harassment of public servants by politicians, parliamentary dictatorship, undermining

the military, and covering up a plot to assassinate leading public figures.

While the alleged assassination plot turned out to be murky and questionable, and public sympathy for the 'undemined' military declined rapidly over the next fifteen months, the first three points of the National Peace-Keeping Council's coup declaration continued to inform a decade of Thai public discourse about political reform. The NPKC junta formed after the coup proceeded to preside over the drafting of a new constitution, which was supposed to reduce the scope for corruption, prevent the politicization of the bureaucracy, and abolish 'parliamentary dictatorship'.

Clearly, the 1991 coup leaders did not solve any of the problems they had highlighted by their seizure of power. Indeed it quickly became evident that the NPKC leadership was, in effect, indistinguishable from the corrupt civilians it had sought to demonize, especially when Suchinda himself accepted the post of prime minister in April 1992 – a post handed to him by a parliament that had been bought up by military cronies (for a fuller discussion, see McCargo, 1997:240–46). Here was parliamentary dictatorship in its ultimate form: a parliament whose election had been orchestrated by a dictatorship, which then presented the premiership to a dictator. The greatest shock of all came when Suchinda announced his cabinet. The very same politicians he had decried a year earlier as 'unusually rich' were now sitting around his cabinet table, in a scene strongly reminiscent of the final pages of Orwell's *Animal Farm*. Suchinda lasted only 48 days as prime minister, before he was ousted following huge popular demonstrations, which culminated in the shooting of scores of unarmed civilians by the military.

Yet despite the failure of the NPKC on one level, in certain respects the coup group was highly successful. Their critique of the Chatichai government's sleazy blend of politics and business, the structural corruption which underpinned and eventually helped undermine the Thai economic boom, remained a salient and convincing assessment in the eyes of many people. Suchinda was an unmitigated disaster as prime minister partly because he failed to live up to the expectations raised by the NPKC, expectations of a reformed political order which would curtail corruption, and reduce abuses of power by elected politicians. The NPKC came and went, but the widespread desire for a 'cleaned up' Thai politics persisted. In effect, the NPKC fell victim to the heightened expectations it had raised: the rhetoric used by the coup leaders to discredit the elected government later became a yardstick with which to

measure, discredited, and beat the NPKC itself. Although the 1991 coup failed as an effective reform movement, the coup had the effect of stirring the air: no longer was it possible easily to revert to the unbridled Chaitchai-style political 'buffetism' that had preceded it.

Enter Prawase Wasi. The 'angelic' (allegedly anti-military and pro-democratic) Chuan Leekpai government of 1992-95 came to power following the turbulence of the NPKC period, and was widely expected to overhaul the Thai political order. But Chuan, a legalistically-minded conservative, whose primary urge (especially in his first spell at Government House) was to tread water, failed to initiate any such moves. A parliamentary committee proposed 25 constitutional changes in 1993: eight were approved by the Lower House, but promptly voted down in the Senate (for a discussion, see Chalidaporn, 1995:331-333). It fell to a professional hunger-striker, Chalard Vorachart, to play a pivotal role in pressing the Chuan government to initiate wide-ranging political reform. Chalard's 1994 protest (he staged major hunger strikes in 1992, 1994, and 1995, at one point spending several weeks living in a cage outside the Dusit Zoo, across the road from Parliament) galvanized considerable support from government MPs in the Palang Dharma Party, and generated enormous media and public sympathy. In order to defuse a situation which threatened to result in a fresh wave of street protests, President of Parliament Marut Bunmag set up the Democratic Development Committee (DDC), under the chairmanship of distinguished physician and social activist Dr Prawase Wasi. The DDC's beginnings were inauspicious: even Prawase himself believed that Chuan's Democrat Party was using him to kick a tricky political problem into touch. But a committee including numerous well-known public figures, several of them expert self-publicists, proved difficult for the government to control. Prawase played a long game, using sympathetic elements in the media to disseminate reformist ideas and stimulate debate. From the formation of the DDC in mid-1994, the political reform movement was established as a focal point in the Thai public sphere.

Understanding political reform

References to political reform have become ubiquitous in Thai public discourse since the mid-1990s. Naturally, no one is opposed to political reform. Yet different groups understand the term in quite different ways (see McCargo, 1998). Because Prawase and other reformers practise the politics of consensus-building, they never seek to call attention to

the conflicting understandings of the term. Instead, they strive to make political reform an inclusionary discourse, which offers advantages for everyone involved. In this way, the reformers adhere to two iron laws of Thai life: avoid conflict, and share benefits. For its leading advocates, political reform is a win-win package. The drive for political reform has therefore been based on deliberately woolly thinking. Despite the production of numerous academic research papers (not to mention endless diagrams), the real politics of the reform process remains largely obscured. Prawase and his supporters sought to build an alliance for political reform comprising elements drawn from the following sectors: the bureaucracy, politicians, the business community, media, academics and public intellectuals, and non-governmental organizations.

In 1995, Prawase produced a highly pertinent eight-point diagnosis of Thailand's political ills (Prawase, 1995:3). He identified the problems as: the dominance of money; the monopolization of politics by a minority; the difficulties faced by good and able people in entering politics; dishonest and improper behaviour; parliamentary dictatorship; political conflict and instability; poor quality of administrative and legislative functions; and lack of political leadership.

Prawase's eight points, which provided the basis for the conflict-avoidance and benefit-sharing of his subsequent proposals, were strikingly similar to the reasons advanced by the National Peace Keeping Council for staging the 1991 military coup: the phrase 'parliamentary dictatorship' was the real give-away. Prawase's core concerns were about the quality of governance, and the need for greater political integrity. His was a moral campaign to allow 'good and able people' to reach high political office, doubtless including former prime minister Anand Panyarachun and the other worthy technocrats who were installed in the cabinet created by the NPKC (widely hailed as Thailand's 'best ever' cabinet). Political reform, as conceived by Prawase, centred on measures designed to place morally-upright technocrats into ministerial posts, without recourse to a military coup. The eight points have little to say about popular representation, and much to say about elite governance. Prawase's eight points could have been met in full by the present Singapore government, or even a Thai cabinet imposed by an IMF fiat. His diagnosis was a deeply conservative one, arguably precisely because it was calculated to bring on board the very people most threatened by the political reform process – the military, the bureaucracy, and beneficiaries of traditional patronage.

Set against the highly conservative nature of the reform position he

advanced in 1995 was Prawase's track record of close collaboration with progressive elements in the NGO movement, through organizations such as the Rural Doctor's Association. For grassroots organizations and community activists, political reform had nothing to do with institutionalizing technocracy: it was about establishing genuinely responsive and representative structures, decentralizing power, and increasing popular participation in decision-making (see Naruemon, 1999). In practical terms, however, progressive organizations could be relied upon to support (or at least not to oppose) virtually any political reform proposals which diminished the entrenched power of the bureaucracy. Prawase could take the progressive organizations largely for granted in his alliance-building efforts, bringing them on board by incorporating a few of their demands into any final package of reforms. Insofar as the 1995 analysis was an attempt to win over key sectors of support for the idea of political reform, the target sectors, therefore, were conservative rather than progressive elements.

Why the imperative to introduce reform, almost any reform, at all costs? To account for this, it is necessary to situate the Democratic Development Committee within its immediate political context. The King was very unwell in 1995. Indeed he was in poor health for much of the 1990s. The death of his mother, the Princess Mother, in July 1995 brought home to the Thai people the mortality of the royal family. For months afterwards, the King was distraught. His mother had died immediately after the formation of the Banham Silpa-archa government, following a general election held at the beginning of July. These two events were dual calamities for Thailand: Banham's election demonstrated that the 'dark forces' of provincial business could now place one of their own into Government House. Previous prime ministers, however doubtful their integrity, were always cloaked in some garb of respectability: they were retired or serving generals, ex-ambassadors, blue-blood courtiers, university professors, or clean-living lawyers. Banham was none of these: he was an upcountry businessman of Chinese descent with a questionable educational background and an old reputation for fixing parliamentary votes with cash incentives. The Banham government seemed like a continuation of the Chatichai government – except that this time the rampant sleaze was no longer masked by Chatichai's extraordinary personal charm. The King's heart condition can hardly have been helped by the mood of collective exasperation with Banham's cabi- net. The King showed his displeasure by appearing almost nightly on television in August 1995, talking for hours at a time about the woeful

state of Bangkok traffic and the need to combat flooding (see Tasker, 1995). These physical problems were clearly metaphors for larger woes. During the latter part of the Chuan government, the King had accused the cabinet of 'biting itself': during the early months of the Banham government, he openly lamented the low quality of ministerial performance, declaring to an audience of diplomats on 17 August 1995, 'They only talk, talk, talk and argue, argue, argue.' (Tasker, 1995)

How closely did Prawase reflect the political thinking of the King? The question must remain an open one, since neither side is likely to talk freely on the subject. Prawase was a royal scholar, sponsored in his studies by the King himself: he later became one of the King's personal physicians. As an elder statesman in Thai society, Prawase has enjoyed the privilege of speaking as someone who was widely assumed to have a hotline to the palace. Prawase's eight-point diagnosis of Thailand's political reforms closely resembles the statements of the King himself, which also resonate with the reasons advanced for the 1991 coup: political instability, corruption, and low-quality politicians were regular themes of royal pronouncements. At least three alternative explanations are possible. The first – and crudest – is that the King asked Prawase to work on the political reform issue, or gave him suggestions when he was appointed to head the DDC. A second explanation, arguably more likely, is that Prawase sought to incorporate his own understanding of the royal view of political reform into his personal agenda, without any explicit prompting or encouragement from the palace. A third is that any parallels between Prawase's ideas on political reform and the King's are simply coincidental.

In November 1995, Prawase addressed a seminar on political reform at the Siam Inter-Continental Hotel in Bangkok. After talking about potential sources of violent conflict in Thailand, he openly voiced his anxieties about the future of Thailand after the death of the King.¹ Who would be able to provide advice on pressing problems such as traffic or flooding? One explanation for the political reform movement of the 1990s was that – at least in the minds of the élite – it was primarily concerned with pre-emptive crisis management, with firming up the political system, so as to make it better able to withstand the calamity of a succession crisis. Since at some time in the future the wise guidance of the King would no longer be available, Thailand needed to attain greater political maturity, and attain it fast. By firming up the political

¹ Author's fieldnotes, 2 November 1995.

system, the reform process would strengthen the political order – and, of course, the institution of the monarchy. In other words, just like King Chulalongkorn's political reforms in the late nineteenth century, the ultimate aim of the political reform movement of the 1990s was to shore up the long-term position of the throne. Reformism was essentially a supporting act for the main attraction, monarchism. Though hailed as a 'people's constitution', the 1997 Thai constitution could also be seen as a palace constitution. Thus the defenders of the legacy of the 1997 constitution were affiliated with the King Prajadhok's Institute, an organization which argued that Thai democracy owed its very existence to the benevolence and liberalism of the last of the country's absolute monarchs.

Populism

Defining populism is tricky: but Bealey argues that populism is characterized by the use of symbols, gestures and rhetoric, appeals to nationalism, criticism of foreign influences, and little emphasis on the substantive explanation of policy (Bealey, 1999:262–263). Populism is sometimes associated with an emphasis on agriculture and the rural sector.

In comparison with other South East Asian countries, Thailand has seen relatively little use of populism by politicians. The last populist prime minister was Sarit Thanarat in the late 1950s and early 1960s: since Sarit, the monarchy has loomed larger than any political leader. One figure who flirted with populism was the former Bangkok governor, Palang Dharma party founder, and sometime deputy prime minister Chamlong Srimuang. When Chamlong played a key role in mobilizing hundreds of thousands of demonstrators during the anti-Suchinda protests of May 1992, his support for mass rally politics 'outside the system' (*nok rabob*) proved his downfall: once Chamlong was shunned by bureaucrats and by the palace, his political career abruptly died (see McCargo, 1997).

If reformism in the 1990s was a movement to prevent political crisis, it failed spectacularly. The 1997 economic meltdown following the *de facto* devaluation of the Thai baht was followed by political turmoil, the ousting of the Chavalit Yongchaiyudh government without recourse to an election. The passage of the new Thai constitution in October 1997 was an attempt to close the stable door after the horse had bolted. The reform movement sought to clean up a political system so dirty that an unholy alliance of incompetent officials and questionable politicians

had succeeded in mistaking most of the country's currency reserves in a matter of a few months. While the reformists continued to demand a slew of subsidiary rethinks – bureaucratic reform, military reform, education reform, health reform, media reform, and the rest – Thailand had to come to terms with the abrupt end of its long boom. In these circumstances, populist rhetoric had an obvious appeal.

Two main strands of populist thinking emerged in Thailand in the wake of the economic crisis (for a related but differently organized discussion, see Naruemon, 1999:314–317). One was a kind of resurgent nationalism, which sought to blame the West – particularly international institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF – for Thailand's problems, criticizing globalization and the 'imperialist designs' of the G7 to subordinate Thailand to economic colonialism. A second form of populist sentiment was based on critiques of the Thai development path of capitalist industrialization, and of Thailand's increasing integration into the world economy: the result was a discourse of localism, emphasizing the need for return to agrarian roots. Some populist arguments drew freely on both these dominant strains of discourse.

It could be suggested that neither discourse was truly populist, in the sense that 'the people' were not clearly invoked. This post-1997 Thai populism quite closely resembled official Thai nationalism, replete with élitist and statist rhetoric. Nevertheless, Hewison makes a strong case for the application of this term to the Thai context, stressing the extent to which localist responses to the crisis were traditional, conservative, and nostalgic, emphasizing agriculture, criticizing industrialization, and denouncing exploitation by outsiders (Hewison, 2000:288–292). The power of these discourses lay in their syncretism, blending elements of standard official nationalism with an implicit, highly romanticized evocation of *khon Thai* (Thai people) as village-dwelling farmers, buffeted by the storms of global capitalism.

Resurgent nationalism

One reaction to the economic crisis of 1997 was to engage in the politics of blame, demonizing international institutions, foreign banks, and currency speculators. Even the normally mild-mannered Prawase Wasi compared foreign forces penetrating the Thai economy with the Burmese sacking of Ayuthaya in 1767, attesting to the extent to which national myths of Thai independence and immunity from foreign incursion have become part of Thai folk memory. A succession of books and

articles began to appear containing ritual denunciations of the wider world. Many were written by leading Thai academics and public intellectuals, virtually all of them Western-educated: some of the most inflammatory publications were funded by the government-backed Thailand Research Fund. Ironically, many of those joining in this unseemly display of pique had previously been ranked among the gurus of Thailand's internationalization and globalization. Among the books that appeared were: *The Declaration of Independence from the IMF*; *World Crisis: the World Bank's Plan to Seize Thailand*; *Financial War: Thailand has only its Name Left*; and *United States: Strategy to Stay in Control*.

Two broad strands could be seen within this flowering of post-crisis critiques. The first strand was one of nationalism, emphasizing rejection of the increased levels of foreign economic control and ownership that were likely to follow the letters of intent agreed between Thailand and the IMF. Ironically, this nationalism had an appeal to both left and right alike. To the military and the bureaucracy, the eleven economic bills drafted by the Chuan government to implement the letters of intent represented a national security threat, a form of colonization and oppression. They feared that the abolition of long-standing laws that reserved certain occupations for Thai nationals would undermine the country's integrity and identity. They were also strongly opposed to privatization policies that would allow foreign companies to purchase Thai enterprises and assets on favourable terms. To the old left, represented by progressive-minded academics and public intellectuals, including a number of lapsed or semi-lapsed Marxist political economists, nationalist rhetoric offered a useful means of opposing privatization and liberalization policies to which they objected for other reasons. Some still objected to privatization on purely ideological grounds: others feared that any implementation of economic liberalization measures would primarily benefit well-connected sections of the Thai business elite. Thus it was necessary to distinguish between genuine nationalism and the populist manipulation of nationalist rhetoric by people who ought to have known better – and probably did.

One of the most outspoken critics of international investors was former foreign minister Dr Thanat Khoman, one of the principal architects of ASEAN. In a short chapter in an edited book entitled *The Declaration of Independence from the IMF*, Thanat echoed Mahathir's criticisms of George Soros and other speculators. Thanat concluded that the economic crisis reflected attempts by developed countries to conquer the developing world without the use of arms, subordinating developing countries to

the dominance of the great powers: 'Thereafter, Thailand would become a tributary country which has lost its sovereignty, losing its nation, religion and monarchy, especially the last of these institutions, which they have been trying to destroy for a long time already. . . . Are our fellow compatriots ready to accept this situation or not?' (Thanat, 1997:3)

That such an argument could be published in a respectable academic volume is testimony to the state of Thai intellectual life by the late 1990s. Thanat offered no evidence whatsoever for his assertion that the economic crisis was part of a plot to destabilize the Thai monarchy. Yet the allegation was an extremely telling one, testifying to the depth of popular anxiety about the future of the monarchy, and to fears that the crisis was exposing the country's fundamental source of political instability and vulnerability. Just as any problem relating to the monarchy was a major problem for Thailand as a whole, so every serious problem encountered by Thailand was a serious problem for the monarchy. Like the death of the Princess Mother exactly two years earlier, the baht devaluation of July 1997 produced a moment of reckoning, an intimation of mortality. The Ninth Reign had been presented as a long period of triumph, during which Thailand had seen off the enemies of communism and poverty, winning out over its neighbours in the region. The currency crisis not only threatened the enormous socio-economic gains of successive decades of growth: more importantly, it challenged the myths that had legitimated the Chakri dynasty, threatening to tarnish the final episodes of a magnificent legacy. It was precisely in order to repel these threats that populist responses to the crisis emerged with such vigour. If Thailand had averted the calamity of colonialism in the nineteenth century only to confront it again at the close of the twentieth, Thai history would need rewriting – and Thai royalism would require renewed scrutiny. The head-banging nationalism of Thanat Khoman came as no surprise to anyone who had followed his public pronouncements in recent years, notably his long-running newspaper campaign against the US government's 'naming and shaming' of certain Thai politicians suspected of involvement in the international drugs trade.

Another form of populist response was the economic nationalism propounded by various academics and public intellectuals in the wake of the crisis. A more sophisticated and coherent version of this economic nationalism appears in the book *United States: Strategy to Stay in Control*. The authors argue that Thai society and the Thai government have been confused in their response to the crisis, not adopting a strategy for victory but simply capitulating to the demands of the United States (Set

Siam, 1998:61). Instead, it argues, the government should have adopted a new strategy based on dignity and independence: 'We may not be the country which has won victory in the war, but we have the ability to avoid losing and shake off our injuries with a vision and political-economic strategy of our own, not just walking within the framework that they have sketched for us to follow.' (Set Siam, 1998:62)

The book went on to reject 'America-ism', calling for a continued programme of political and economic reforms to strengthen the country, explicitly comparing this reform programme with those introduced by King Chulalongkorn in order to strengthen Siam against the economic dominance of the Western colonial powers (Set Siam, 1998:63). Nationalism could offer a direct legitimating rationale for reformism. The book called for an aggressive strategy to reform Thailand, overcome the crisis, and defend the country from external threats. At the moderate end of the nationalist spectrum, the book stressed the extent to which Thais had to take charge of their own destiny. Reform was invoked as a strategy to ensure that Thais were able to manage change on their own terms, rather than accept terms dictated from outside.

Much more populist in its argument was *World Crisis: the World Bank's Plan to Seize Thailand*. Taking as its starting point an August 1998 World Bank report, the book's introduction by Pittaya Wongkul argues that agreements between the Thai government and the IMF and World Bank were unconstitutional under article 224 of the 1997 constitution, since they were never ratified by parliament (Pittaya, 1999:7). Laws which allowed foreigners to buy land in Thailand violated article 1 of the Thai constitution, which describes Thailand as a single, indivisible territory. Pittaya went on to criticize numerous aspects of the August 1998 report, citing the fact that the authors spent only 18 days doing field research as evidence of the low regard in which the World Bank held Thailand (Pittaya, 1999:8). He argued that the IMF and World Bank effectively usurped the role of the Thai government in gaining effective control over economic, political, and social affairs: 'this meant that Thailand had fallen into foreign hands already' (Pittaya, 1999:24). In the guise of helping the country, the international institutions had displaced national capital and handed over Thailand's economy to big international investors (Pittaya, 1999:26). In the same book, owner of U-Com and former politician Put Primanot argued that Dr Mahathir had been right to see the assistance of Western-based institutions in the wake of the crisis as part of a hidden agenda to take control of the Asian economies.

Another Mahathir admirer was Kamol Kamoltrakul, a US-trained

financial analyst and NGO activist who had published various books on the crisis, including *IMF: Saint or Sinner? In Financial War: Thailand has only its Name Left*. Kamol praised a series of Malaysian measures, especially Mahathir's creation of DAHAKTA, a national asset management company, to ameliorate the effects of the crisis. He argued that Malaysia's responses to the crisis were substantive responses, rather than measures that simply generated new problems, as in Thailand (Kamol, 1999:133). The thrust of the book was a contrast between Thailand's passive response to the economic situation, and Malaysia's active attempts to find solutions.

Localism

While the discourse of nationalism was concerned mainly with the politics of blame, criticizing outside forces for creating and exploiting Thailand's economic difficulties, the discourse of localism approached the same problems from a different perspective. For many years, community culture theorists had been arguing that the ideal model for Thailand lay in an alternative development path which drew upon indigenous wisdom, and the economic system which, allegedly, was previously found in every Thai village – a self-sufficient economy that relied on norms of reciprocity rather than cash transactions (Charthry, 1991). During the boom period of the 1980s and early 1990s, these ideas had been regarded as charming but impractical, and largely irrelevant to Thailand's economic and political realities as a prospective newly-industrializing country. Only one major politician had attempted to mainstream some of these views – former Bangkok governor Chamlong Srimuang (McCargo, 1997).

Following the 1997 crash, however, ideas of a scaled-down economy, a renewed emphasis on agriculture, and a reaction against rampant consumerism and the blind pursuit of economic growth achieved a new respectability. This came about largely as a result of the King's birthday speech on 4 December 1997, when he took the opportunity to commend the development of a more self-sufficient economy, and urged people to buy fewer imported goods. He did not argue that the country should become completely self-sufficient, simply that such ideas could be applied to 25 per cent or 50 per cent of Thailand's economic activity. The speech captured a prevailing mood of dissatisfaction with the existing order, and the views it articulated were generally referred to as the 'new theory'. As Pasuk (unpublished) noted, phrases from the speech immediately

entered common parlance all around the country, and leading figures such as Prawase Wasi, Thirayuth Boonmi, and Saneh Chamark began to expand upon and interpret ideas of localism and self-sufficiency.

Nevertheless, a year on from the 1997 royal speech it appeared that many of the responses – including projects initiated by the Interior and Agriculture Ministries – had yet to move beyond the level of tokenism. While the government focused upon addressing structural problems in the banking and financial sectors, and restarting the stalled economy, there was little sign of a substantive shift towards a scaled-down, rural-based economic order. On 4 December 1998, the King again addressed the topic of what he now preferred to translate as the 'sufficiency economy', and complained that some people, including development experts, had failed to understand his views properly. He insisted that complete self-sufficiency was impossible: the point of a 'sufficiency economy' was simply that people had enough to live on. 'Sufficiency means to lead a reasonably comfortable life, without excess, or overindulgence in luxury, but enough.' (Royal speech, n.d.:10) Converting 25 per cent of the country's land to sufficiency principles would not meet his aims: the point was that sufficiency principles should be applied to 25 per cent of the economy.

Doubtless stung by the allegation that development specialists had misunderstood the King's ideas on the sufficiency economy, TDRI made the issue the theme of its 1999 annual conference, held in the same month as the King's seventy-second birthday. The conference featured two days of papers on the subject by leading economists such as Apichai Puntasen, dedicated to analysing and scrutinizing issues of sufficiency. In a keynote address, former prime minister Anand Panyarachun declared that the notion of a sufficiency economy was relevant not only to the agricultural sector: it was now time to apply it to the industrial and service sectors as well. Speaker after speaker who had built his career upon Thailand's conventional economic development and industrialization stood up to announce his conversion to a rather different set of understandings and applications.

When Pasuk Phongpatit presented a sympathetic paper on localism at an Australian conference in April 1999, Kevin Hewison responded with a critique at the Amsterdam Thai Studies Conference that July – in a paper co-authored with Malcolm Falkus. Hewison's core criticism of the localism discourse was that there was a contradiction between the top-down inspiration of the discourse and its claims to represent grassroots villagers:

Even more problematic is the involvement of state officials. When they take up 'localism', especially when the King's ideas are included, notions of self-reliance and self-sufficiency are effectively hijacked into a state development discourse. . . . Populism has almost always been associated with nationalism and, as noted above, the 'localism discourse' is no different. In the Thai case, this is interesting, as nationalism has been closely identified with monarchs and the military. Indeed, the 'localism discourse' has come to include all elements of the national trilogy of 'Nation, Religion, and Monarchy'. (Falkus and Hewison, unpublished:19)²

Despite its rhetorical emphases on village and community, the discourse of localism was closely related to good old-fashioned nationalism.³ It was striking that supposed 'leftists' sympathetic to grassroots movements found considerable common cause with conservatives and bureaucrats in calling for a return to rural values and self-reliance: the range of debate had narrowed considerably since the 1970s.

The extent to which Thai economists and policy specialists were really won over to a localist view of economic development was difficult to measure, but it seems fair to assume that the main impetus behind the localism discourse was a political one. Community culture advocates and NGO activists have sought to make use of the localism discourse to highlight long-standing concerns, while some politicians have seen support for localism as a means to facilitate their own efforts at image-building and rehabilitation. The agribusiness giant CP argued that Thailand should indeed shift away from industrialization and move towards a more agricultural economy, and offered to play a leading role in the process.⁴ During 1999, it served everyone's purposes to praise the idea of the 'sufficient economy', and to enthuse (usually in vague terms) about its imminent implementation.

How seriously was it possible to take the twin discourses of economic nationalism and localism? Apart from the facile quality of some contributions to the debate, it is difficult to believe that all those who joined in the anti-IMF, anti-globalization clamour were completely serious. In part, the responses must be seen as an intellectual coping mechanism, a

² For a revised and expanded version of Hewison's part of the paper, see Hewison, 2000.

³ Indeed, in his 1998 birthday speech, the King also stated that foreigners were taking advantage of Thailand's situation: 'It is not that we have to believe foreigners, or foreign economists. Some of them only look for their own interests; they come, it can be said, to dig for gold in this country. These foreign industrialists and businessmen are pleased; Thailand is in a mess'. (Royal speech, n.d.:38)

⁴ 'Should Farm Sector Get Real Support?' [editorial], *The Nation*, 3 January 2000.

means for intellectuals, activists, and members of the élite to come to terms with the crisis. In part, they were the outpourings of people in denial: criticizing outsiders was an easy way to deflect attention from the shortcomings of Thai politicians, bureaucrats, and business leaders.

Conclusion

In Pattaya in December 1999, an institute named after a former monarch held a major conference about political reform, while a second institute held another major conference to discuss royal ideas about economic development. Reformism, nationalism, and localism are by no means synonymous with royalism, yet recent trends in Thailand saw conservative discourses assume a dominant role in public debate about political and economic questions. Radical, progressive, and liberal arguments were increasingly subordinated to, or subsumed by, conservative and royalist discourses and perspectives, which were taking on populist dimensions.

Thai politics was in a highly fluid condition. Encouraged by the apparent opening up of political space under the 1997 constitution, protest movements (often based on environmental or livelihood issues) were emerging in provinces all over the country, testifying to a mood of grassroots frustration and a popular rejection of representative politics. In July 2000, the right-wing populist Samak Sundaravej was elected governor of Bangkok by a huge majority, demonstrating yet again that voters in the Thai capital had not assumed the liberal democratic political values so often attributed to them. The January 2001 general election, the first under the 'cleaned up' political order, was to prove by far the most corrupt and controversial in Thailand's history. While the constitutional reforms and economic crisis of 1997 had shaken up the Thai order, provoking nationalist and localist responses, it was hard to generalize about the overall political direction of the country. Thailand was entering a new period of heightened conflict between competing interests, constantly overshadowed by a growing anxiety about the succession question.

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