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A Study of Negative Connotations in
Thailand's 80 Years of Democracy*

Mohammad Zaidul Anwar Bin Haji Mohamad Kasim

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Mohammad Zaidul Anwar Bin Haji Mohammad Kasim

Thammasat Institute of Area Studies, Thammasat University
99 Moo 18 Khlongnueng Sub District, Khlong Luang District,
Pathum Thani, 12121, Thailand

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For more information, please contact Academic Support Unit, Thammasat Institute of Area Studies (TIARA), Patumthani, Thailand

Telephone: +66

Fax: + 66 2 564-2849

Email: academic.tiara@gmail.com

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Mr. Mohammad Zaidul Anwar Bin Haji Mohamad Kasim, Email: maulazyad11@yahoo.com

Or Academic Support Unit, Thammasat Institute of Area Studies, Thammasat University

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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Mr. Mohammad Zaidul Anwar Bin Haji Mohamad Kasim

Abstract

In 1932, the regime of Thai absolute monarchy comes to an abrupt end. Ever since, Thailand's attempts at democracy haven't been smooth. The country had fallen into decades of turmoil due to political instability and lack of readiness of Thai interest groups and society to absorb and maximise the new changes that had been brought to them. For the past 80 years, Thailand political landscape can be said as politically unstable. Unstable due to the domestic struggles of what define 'Thai democracy' as well as what model of democracy could fit in the context of Thai politics. Thai democracy per se is a continuous process and a work in progress, which every interest groups still struggle to find their 'corners and positions' which could serve everyone interest and the same pattern still persist today. This paper seeks to clarify and examine the existence of negative perceptions towards Thai politics that engineered negative and distrustful attitude of the Thais towards democracy. Why, after 80 years of experiments, trials and error does no good to Thai democracy but ultimately almost destroyed the democracy altogether. This works explore the development of the negative literatures and narratives on Thai politics over the past 80 years to see the pattern of such hypothesis. As the pioneer of such work, it is hope that this finding will shed light on the severity & impacts of such narratives, in a way it is hoped that it can bring new perspectives in looking at Thai politics.

Keywords: Thai politics, democracy, fragmented power, key interest groups

Since 1932, Thailand political landscape had changed from the envisioned gradual democratic transition into decades of turmoil, coups and counter coups as the stakeholders of Thai politics from the old and new regimes try to awkwardly complement each other. Thailand democratic transition is no less a mystery, as its introduction was brought about by small number of elite students taking the advantage of growing dissatisfactions towards the monarchy way of handling the state. However, the majority of Thais are still poor and illiterate, leaving the questions of power to the hand of few. Moreover, the recent consolidation of the state from the centre of its power, Bangkok, had given a limited sense of empowerment to the privilege groups within the society such as the children of local chiefs and extended family of the Royal family while living the rest of the country stick to its primitive way of life. Through this limited empowerment, bureaucracy was strengthened to become the engine to modernise Thailand while the military were reformed to follow western standard tasked to defend the modern nation state. This becomes the impetus of the early key interests groups that participate in the games of power in Thailand. Since from the beginning, it seems Thailand roads was meant to be difficult, precarious and bloody, as democracy has been a vehicle for certain groups to achieve their goals, not as a set of rules or a system that every players agreed to heed and play within the game. Consequently, throughout 80 years of Thai attempts at democracy, a lot of energy and lives had lost, while within that long span of time, Thai democracy experience limited progress and prolong duress as can be seen through history. It experienced prolong military dictatorship past from one hands to another while democracy held responsible for nonstop rumours and scandals that hurt its image.

Despite under pressure of military rules, democracy continues to flourish underground and makes their debut in 1970's when democracy makes a brief returns. The triple alliance of students, workers and farmers had gained the sympathy of the nation and their struggle finally recognised. Feeling triumphant, the students ante up the game asking real change to be introduced in Thailand. Miscalculating the strength of their movements, ideology and the readiness of the Thai society for real change, the students becomes the victims of illegible rumours linking them with the feared communist elements thus their struggle and hopes quickly squashed and democracy come back to its limbo state. The dawn of the semi

democracy under Prem initiate a due process to bring back the democracy while the top job in the nation still in the hands of the military. Soon enough, democracy made its headway with the rise of democratic elected leaders in 1988, starting with Chuan Leekpai, despite a brief intermission in 1992. But democracy was held hostage by a group of people that democracy that tries to avoid, politician cum businessmen or better known as 'Chao Pho'. With the parliament becomes the centre stage of drama and scandals within the politics, and there are times in front of live telecast, democracy effectively associated with these corrupts individual and their unashamed malpractice at the expense of the state. Key players in Thai politics quickly seek for ways to get rid of them and found one, the unprecedented 1997 People's Constitution that will change how games is played in Thai politics. In the midst of increasing dissatisfaction towards the Chao pho, their economic mismanagement, self-centred administration and corrupt practice catalyst the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, create further mistrust towards democracy, of what Chris Baker called as the 'Scandalisation of politics'(Chris Baker, 2000).

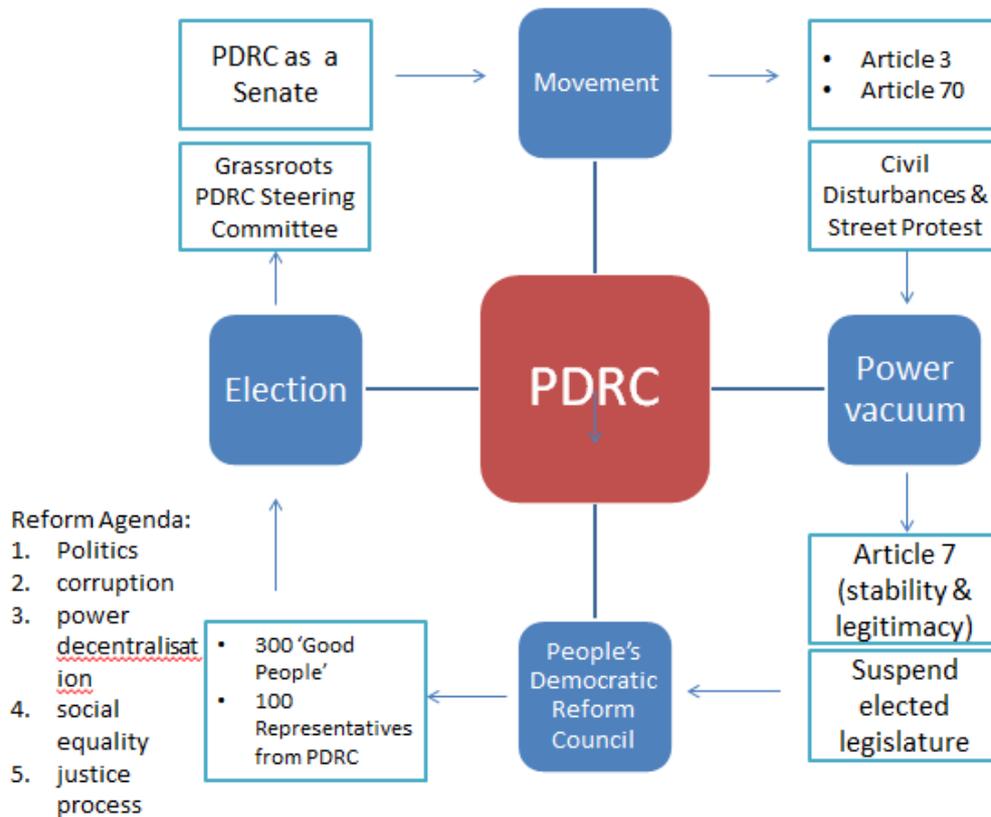
From the grunts of failed businesses to the complaints of the middle class and the silent sufferings of the unemployed workers; the Thai society expecting big change to come to the rescue through 1997 constitution and the next election (Satitniramai, 2007). Despite the scandalisation of politics by the media and academics, Thai people in general still hope for political solutions that can turn this crisis around. Looking at the current situation, Thai Rak Thai Party (TRT) lead by Thaksin used this as a model for their electoral platform which eventually brings them to the Government House. Thaksin through the use of the 1997 Constitution, expand the roles and power of the executive, which enables him to manoeuvre around and brought changes to the livelihood of the once muted underprivileged groups within the Thai society. Although Thaksin methodology to remain in power is controversial, for the fact that it works worries the traditional bastion of power together with emboldened Thaksin head on challenge to their interests. The 19th September 2006 coup is not a simple coup as the rest. This coup shown another aspect of Thai politics, i.e. how fragmented the power is to the point that the real wielder of power shifts between those elected and the vested powers. The question poised here is, what triggers the negative connotations towards the Thai politics over time and what makes democracy 'imprison' with such narratives?. The author suggests, this narratives and conceptions has been built since the introduction of democracy, for the fact that democracy is not an

agreement of power sharing but rather an instrument for competing forces to protect their interests which persist up until today. For this reason, Thai democracy will remain 'imprison' and attached to this connotation until such a time the interest of key interest groups wane that allows the empowerment of democracy once again.

What's next is to understand the extent of negative perceptions towards Thai democracy. In order to understand this, the author embarks on a tedious study of news clippings related to People's Democratic Reforms Committee or simply known as PDRC. PDRC is a classic example of a staunch anti-democratic¹ movement that engineers the street protest prior to the last coup. PDRC come into being on 30th November 2013 corresponding to Pheu Thai blunder in their attempts to introduce amnesty bill and to change the senate to be a fully elected body. PDRC jobs to rouse supports from the public made easy as negative connotations of Thai politics no longer served as empty narratives, but already have a soul and strength to be invoked among the masses, as can be learn from the political struggle since the fall of Thaksin. The Secretary General of the movement, Suthep Thaugsuban successfully reincarnate the now defunct remnants of Yellow Shirts movement to be part of its strategy to 'cleanse' Thaksin regime (BangkokPost, 2013b). PDRC is quite adept at making linkages by arousing people distrusts and playing with their anxiety just from the 'allergic' word of Shinawatra. PDRC goes extra length by extending the ideology to hate Thaksin to be extended to the whole democracy, effectively making much damage to the image of democracy itself. Basically, the People's Council system works first by creating a political vacuum by any means necessary, so that the People's Council can be established to replace the parliament. Accordingly, the envisioned council will be made up of 400 members, of which 300 members comes from wide section of the society while 100 others will be handpicked by PDRC as the steering Committee. The Council then continue with its works to reform the country revolving around 5 main themes such as Politics, corruption, power decentralisation, social equality and justice process which expected to finished in one year time (BangkokPost, 2013a). Suthep insist, election will be restored and the People's Council will be suspended soon after.

¹ The author can safely say their movement as anti-democratic from the study of it manifesto that entails undemocratic vision of the movement itself.

Table 1: PDRC's Manifesto



Source: Based on the author's analysis

The irony is that, despite its undemocratic in nature, for the facts that such ideology does works is quite amusing. On the surface, the main theme of the protest is due to firstly the incompetent and corrupt government. Contrariwise, for the fact that it was led by the blood sister of the man they hate, it gives them more 'capital' to attack democracy as somewhat hijacked by Thaksin's elements and becomes the so called grand plan of 'Thaksin Regime' that in need to be uprooted as soon as possible. Therefore, joining PDRC's ranks are almost a hundred networks coming from different backgrounds that supports their cause such as medical professionals, labour student union, economic players, political parties, military, student unions, religious leaders amongst many that pledge their support for PDRC's struggle and manifesto. Not only that, infamous rich families made their debuts and show a strong presence in PDRC rallies, which is something had never been seen before (Marshall, 2013). Such a strong presence of both political and apolitical groups just shows how successful

PDRC had been in term of the strength of their ideology. Conversely, this is a worrying trend for democracy as many sections in the society started to questions democracy and attracted to the idea of ‘an alternative’ to it.

However, ideology alone is not enough to be effective in achieving their envisioned People’s Council. Their multi strategy of street protest and civil disturbances becomes the hallmark of their movements. Yet, through the author study, this method to their disappointment does little impact to their movements as a whole (BangkokPost, 2014d). These strategies do more damage to the economy and the livelihood of urban dwellers and commuters but done little dent to the caretaker government that they seek to depose. In desperation, Suthep struggles to keep the momentum going with dwindling numbers of protesters and growing pressures from ‘his backers’ to come up with results. Numerous lists of tactics such as to boycott the general election process, street rallies, sporadic ‘planned’ violences²,civil disturbances at the heart of commercial districts in Bangkok and Government complexes, harassing independent media outlets, non-stop names callings & verbal abuses and endless court cases amongst others did not bring much change to the game. Feeling hapless, Suthep’s movement becomes low key while waiting for the independent agencies to do its job. PDRC failed to take into account how long it will take just to achieve their dream and through what channel it can be achieve. PDRC seems to know, the civil disobedience and street protest strategy that they lead will not last long and the momentum could ran out of its steam soon enough. Consequently, PDRC have come up with steps on how to achieve political vacuum that enables the formation of People’s Council. The 4 steps to oust the government can be summarise as the following; first to impeach Yingluck through alleged corruption (which later change to dereliction of duty), second, to remove all Pheu Thai minister through scandals that can implicate them out of office, third to nullify the February poll as the government failed to produce result within 30 days after election and lastly to banned 308 MPs who tries to amend the constitution in December (XinhuaNewsAgency, 2014). PDRC realised, they have done their part by smearing the image of democracy and the elected government, now it’s time for the constitutional institutions to take up the tasks from where they left.

² The author will come up with a following paper discussing the violence happened during the course of PDRC’s street protest, discussing how these violence helped to bring about the outcomes that PDRC want

With the election effectively annulled, absence of the House of Representatives, a new senate and Prime Minister and Yingluck administration losing the legitimacy; the legislative and the executive power is basically powerless leaving the judicature to dictate the fate of the Thai politics. After a prolong defend in front of Constitutional Court judges and hundreds of pages of evidence, the court decided to go ahead and announce the verdict on Thawil case. In the afternoon of 07th May 2014, for the first time in Thai history, an elected Prime Minister ousted from office through 'judicial coup' (BangkokPost, 2014z). She was found to be abusing her power for illegal transfer of Mr. Thawil to a redundant post of Advisor at the Prime Minister's Office in September 2011. PDRC thought, this will be their cue to establish the People's Council, therefore the movement push the Senate and the Supreme Court to intervene so that a 'neutral' Prime Minister can be appointed. When the senate refused to do so, Suthep becomes desperate and set the deadline to seize the power by 26th May for whatever the outcomes would be. PDRC and its affiliations start to take over symbolically the seat of power by making the Santi Maitree of the Government House as its command centre (BangkokPost, 2014b). Not long after, as the violence starts to escalate, this development prompts the military to act by announcing a blanket martial law throughout the nation and establish a new peace keeping body replacing the Centre for Administration of Peace and Order (CAPO); the all-powerful Peace and Order Maintaining Command (POMC) (BangkokPost, 2014c). After 2 days of attempt to find political solutions and dismayed at the political impasse, Prayuth launched a coup (BangkokPost, 2014a). On 24th May 2014, PDRC effectively disbanded, merely two days short from their deadline in achieving their goal of establishing the People's Council.

PDRC had shown us the existence and extent of negative connotation of Thai politics and how it affects Thailand's pursuit of a mature democracy. Through the study of PDRC as a movement and the persistent of its ideology; it can be sure that, persistent negative perception in Thai politics and its strength both as literature and ideology slowly eats democracy that many lives have fought for to establish for the past 80 years. The author argued this negative perception is in need to be understood, dissect and studied, so that counter narratives and arguments can be provided to argue in its behalf. Thai democracy

must be release from the chain of its own dilemma, which most of it is social construct³ that doesn't even reflect the true nature of what constitute as 'Thai democracy'. Democracy in this country has become a victim of its own existence, thanks to the way it was molded as well as its utility as a tool for certain groups. What are left are legacies that aren't many Thais proud of, therefore PDRC Manifesto gets into its way. 80 years of attempts at democracy shouldn't go to the drain after many sacrifices and lives have been lost just to keep and develop it.

³ Mainly revolved around how the Thais think. Thais perspective often in many cases are 'unique', the same case can be apply on Thai politics. Therefore, the author argues, Thai politics needs to break free from this 'perspective' in order to move forward

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Author's Profile

Name Mohammad Zaidul Anwar Haji Mohamad Kasim

Date of Birth June 15th, 1991



Educational Attainment

- August 2015- December 2016: Master of Arts in Asia Pacific Studies, College of Interdisciplinary Studies, Thammasat University, Bangkok
- August 2011- September 2015: Bachelor of Arts in Historical and International Studies (First Class Honours) with CGPA 3.85/4.00, Department of Historical and International Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS), University of Brunei Darussalam (UBD), Negara Brunei Darussalam.

Scholarship

- 2015/2558: Recipient of Thammasat University Scholarship for Academic year 2015

Work Position

- Affiliated Researcher (since January 2015), Institute of Asian Studies (IAS), University of Brunei Darussalam (UBD)
- Affiliated Researcher (since October 2016), Thammasat Institute for Area Studies (TIARA), Thammasat University.
- Program Coordinator (since April 2016), Masters of Arts in Asia Pacific Studies, College of interdisciplinary Studies (CIS), Thammasat University.

Work Experiences

- Research Assistant (Jan-Aug 2015), Institute of Asian Studies (IAS), University of Brunei Darussalam
- Student Assistant (April-June 2015), UBD Corps, University of Brunei Darussalam,

Publications

Mohammad Zaidul Anwar. (2016). *Indonesian Empowerment through Social Welfare System: Thailand's Experience*. 9th Indonesian International Forum. Atma Jaya Catholic University. Jakarta: IIF.

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Thammasat Institute of Area Studies (TIARA)

Thammasat Institute of Area Studies as one of the most active institute in Thammasat University has a long history of academic excellence. Starting out as an institute named Thai APEC Study Centre, the institute focus basically on conducting research and to advise the government in the matter of policy making. One of such example is research and training collaborations with the Office of National Broadcasting and Telecommunication Commission (NBTC). Later on, the institute grown to accommodate another Institute namely Australian Study Centre (ASC) and renamed to Thammasat Institute for Study of International Cooperation (TISIC). With this new structure, the Institute expands its research base to include that of Australia and New Zealand. Master of Arts in Asia Pacific Studies (MAPS) coming up as a result of years of experience in conducting research and academic exchanges through the above mention institutes. The Master program was officially launched in 2015 with its first batch already producing some of the best works for the institute.

In line with the University wide restructuring, in 2015, the Institute underwent a major revamp to include 3 more area studies institutes namely Indian Studies Centre, Russian and CIS Studies Centre and ASEAN Studies Centre. With the consolidation of these 3 new area study centres, the institute therefore renames Thammasat Institute of Area Study (TIARA). The institute will continue what it do best, to continue producing high quality academic excellence and hope with the new restructuring, the institute will be able to achieve more in the coming years.

For more information on TIARA, you can visit our website at <http://www.apecthai.org/>

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Master of Arts in Asia Pacific Studies (MAPS) program is an up and coming area study based master degree in Thailand. Focusing on Asia Pacific Studies, MAPS is a multidisciplinary graduate program that helps interested students to have an in depth understanding of this dynamic region. With a strong foundation of academic curriculum and high quality facilitators across all academic backgrounds, Master of Arts in Asia Pacific Studies will guide students through the disciplines of Politics, Economics, International Law and International relations to give a well-rounded understanding of Asia Pacific. These advanced courses offer a more in depth examination of questions and problems specific to the Asia Pacific region. Our graduates go on to pursue careers in academia, business organisations, government and wide array of organisations, both local and international.

Our students will also have the chance to familiarise with the academic settings in a sense that through their thesis course, student will be exposed to all kinds of academic scrutiny such as thesis defend and comprehensive thesis writing course. Nearing to the end of the program, student will be given a chance to showcase their hard labour at an International Conference held specially to facilitate the students learning curve. In the end, the works that they put their heart and soul into will become the pride of the program as each one of them, despite their different backgrounds; can come up with a thorough and deep analysis of particular research program concentrated on Asia Pacific and finally contribute to the literature on Asia Pacific Studies.

Contact Us

Main Office

Thammasat Institute of Area Studies (TIARA), Thammasat University
Thammasat University, Rangsit Center
Dome Administration Building, 1st Fl.
99 Moo 18, Phaholyothin Rd., Khlong Nueng, Khlong Luang
Patumthani, 12121, Thailand
Tel. (66) 2 -564 – 2851 (-3)
Fax. (66) 2-564-2849
Email: tasc@tu.ac.th
Website: www.apecthai.org
Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/TISIC.TU>

MAPS Program

Tel. (66) 2 -564 – 3129, (66) 2 – 696-6605
Mobile. (66) -81- 487 -3334
Fax. (66) 2-564-3128
Email: maps.tisic@gmail.com
Website: www.maps-tu.org
Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/mapshammasat/>

Thammasat University, Ta Prachan Liaison Office

Thammasat Institute for Study of International Cooperation (TISIC)
Thammasat University, Ta Prachan Centre
Anekprasong 2 Building, 3rd Fl.
2 Prachan Rd., Phra Borom Maha Ratchawang
Phra Nakhon, Bangkok, 10200, Thailand
Tel. (66) 2- 613-3160
Fax. (66) 2- 623 - 5189