

WebMemo



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In Defense of Thailand's Democracy

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Over the last couple of months, one of America's two treaty allies in Southeast Asia turned the page on a period of intense political instability. And it did so democratically. Americans should take a moment to acknowledge Thailand as a member in good standing of the democratic club that is America's system of alliances in East Asia and the Pacific.

Reminders of an Undemocratic, Unstable Past.

The most recent chapter of Thai political history began a little more than two years ago. On September 19, 2006, the military staged a coup to unseat and essentially exile Thailand's elected prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra. Despite 14 years of uninterrupted democratic governance, global perceptions of a Thailand beset with chronic political instability quickly returned.

The unelected military-backed government exacerbated negative perceptions by mangling the Thai economy. And where the new government was widely expected to outperform the previous administration—dealing with the southern Islamist insurgency—it failed.

Then, at the end of 2007, after absorbing a coup, suffering under a year of inept government, and approving a new constitution designed to deflate the powers of the prime minister, new elections returned to government proxies for Thaksin and his disbanded Thai Rak Thai Party (TRT). Thailand appeared to pick up right where it left off in September 2006: Political strife dominated 2008; two prime ministers were forced from power; protests escalated

to the point of shutting down Bangkok's airports; and the economy dragged through the year.

A Welcome Turn of Events. As 2008 drew to a close, pressure for another coup grew. But then something positive happened: Democracy provided a channel for government to change hands. Was the transfer of power pretty? No. Did it involve political trade-offs? Certainly. But expediency—as well as opacity—in democratic politics is a matter of degree, not kind.

In a parliamentary system, legitimate change in government is possible without proximate appeal to general elections. The Democrat party pulled enough sitting MPs away from the latest iteration of a Thaksin-based party and its coalition partners to form a new government under the leadership of opposition leader Abhisit Vejjajiva.

Critics point to the messiness of the process and nefarious connections among Thai royalty, military, politicians, bureaucrats, and judges. Political intrigue makes for good copy. But in an environment as prone to rumor as Bangkok, and with so much at stake, it is important to separate out the facts.

First, it is a matter of public record that army commander General Anupong Paochinda urged the

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prime minister to resign. Second, it is a fact that in October, the queen attended the funeral of a protester killed in a clash with police. Both were very powerful gestures in Thai politics. But they do not amount to a coup. Nor do they explain the formation of the new Democrat government, or the Democrats' victories in subsequent by-elections. Disillusionment with the Thaksin-proxies in the electorate and factional cracks in his party base were already present and growing; pulling them apart did not require a mastermind general.

In 2006, the United States was right to insist that Thailand return to democratic rule as quickly as possible. Even when some argued that the United States's geopolitical position in the region would suffer as a result of the pressure—China being all the willing to step into the gap—the Bush Administration remained focused on the longer term. It suspended more than \$29 million in assistance to Thailand, including financing for military hardware and training for Thai officers. At the same time, however, the Administration maintained regular diplomatic contact with the Thais and preserved some of the most critical areas of the relationship, including military exercises and vital counterterrorism cooperation.

In 2006, the Thai military unwisely aborted a political process that would have eventually resolved the crisis without intervention. There are a great many variables involved in comparing September 2006 with December 2009: Thaksin's role, the bungling of his military appointed successors, a new constitution, a changing electorate, and civil society fatigue. But, essentially, the events of the last few months in Thailand prove that coup is not an inevitable feature of Thai politics and that democracy is stability's partner, not its enemy.

The Road Ahead. The Thai Democrat Party has a considerable amount of work to do. The new prime minister must find a way to reach across the political spectrum in Bangkok and elsewhere to heal the yawning divide. The perception that his ascension to power is purely the product of political maneuvering is refutable, but it will prove corrosive over time. There is also a significant element of anti-democratic class exceptionalism among the forces that brought him to power. And there is resistance

outside of Bangkok to his Oxford-educated persona. He will have to take both issues head-on. But ultimately these are matters for Thais to resolve.

Indeed, Americans have their own work to do. Thailand was a key ally of the United States during the Cold War. Thais by the thousands fought side by side with Americans in Korea and in Vietnam. Thailand also contributed non-combat troops to the American-led coalitions in Iraq and Afghanistan and has served as a critical logistics node in the movement of American forces around the globe.

But the Thais, as much as any power in the region, pay close attention to geopolitical trends. During World War II, Thai Prime Minister and strongman Phibunsongkhram famously asked one of his commanders, "Which side do you think will lose this war? That side is our enemy." And he began to hedge his early bets on the Japanese.

Today it is China's rise that is the most striking fact of life in East Asia. And its rise is not unwelcome in Thailand. This is not necessarily a bad thing: China is an important economic partner for both the U.S. and its Asia-Pacific allies. America cannot ask our allies to recuse themselves from the opportunity China offers any more than it can refrain from reaping the benefits itself.

What the United States can do, however, is be absolutely clear about its long-term commitment to the region. It should intensify its economic engagement, not retreat from it. This means embracing free trade agreements. The proposed Free Trade Area of the Asia Pacific now has a core around which to develop—the Trans-Pacific Economic Partnership (TPP)—free trade negotiations underway between eight Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation member economies. A bilateral U.S.–Thai free-trade agreement was left on the table in 2006. America should dust it off and get negotiations moving again with an eye toward not only completing a first-rate agreement but including the Thais in the broader TPP.

On the diplomatic, military side, the U.S. should make clear that it has no intention of compromising its predominance in Asia. Such clarity demands a level of defense spending that will belie Asian suspicions of an American superpower in

decline. It also means participating in the region's diplomatic life. This year's Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum is being held in Thailand. Prior to the last few years, the U.S. secretary of state's attendance was a given. Once again becoming a reliable ASEAN participant in the year America's Thai allies host will be well-noted in the region. President Obama should also resurrect plans for a full-fledged U.S.–ASEAN leaders' summit, an idea abruptly cancelled by President Bush in 2007, and schedule it in Thailand during this year's ASEAN leaders' meetings.

Reinforcing the Alliance. America's allies are the foundation of its commitment to Asia. These allies make policy formulation easier when they stay true to their democratic values. When one of the allies strays, the U.S. should help bring it back to its senses, as President Bush sought to do with Thailand. By the same token, when one demonstrates a commitment to the alliance's mutual values, America should use the occasion to reinforce the relationship. It is good to have Thailand in the club.

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