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Political Forces In Thailand*

Pornpilai Lertvicha**

It is generally accepted that the Thai political system is oscillating between democracy and dictatorship. The tactics and strategy of the various political forces have long been interpreted and classified according to these two poles. Is this classic dual characterisation still valid? Many concrete policies and political schemes proposed and upheld by these forces do not seem to fit into this broad classification and appear to require new characterisation. The political complexity can lose significant contents through over-simplification for the sake of clarity for exposition. Furthermore, simplistic assessments have contributed to the stagnation of political development in Thailand, and social development never seems to get started.

This article will attempt to classify and characterise the present trends among political forces in order to demonstrate the complexity to current political events. This kind of static description of social movements has its limits, but the main moving forces will be taken into consideration.

The important political forces in Thai society today can be identified as follows:

1) the conservative group
2) the progressive military group
3) the large-scale-holding capitalist group

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4) the petite bourgeoisie
5) the labour movement
6) the peasantry

**The Conservative Group**

This group is composed of royalists and conservative militarymen. Its main instrument is the bureaucracy, both of government and para-government organisations. Even though it is in favour of a capitalist economy, the conservative group cannot accept modern capitalists as its substitute in the political arena. Consequently, it tends to favour capitalist dictatorship. Its assets and investments are enormous; the Crown Property alone represents the fourth largest corporation in Thailand and comprises 44 companies.

The conservative group has had to adapt itself to the socio-economic environment of modern, world-wide business conditions. Despite this, because of its historical characteristics, it would reproduce the feudal ideology to preserve its political leadership, whereas the modern capitalist group reproduces a liberal ideology.

Generally speaking, the conservative group as a political entity opposes the economic development of Thai society, the latter having progressed far beyond the feudalistic society of the absolute monarchy era. Besides, the Thai economy has firmly linked up with world capitalism since the mid 1960s when the first National Economic Development Plan was implemented. But, endowed with authority and a strong economic base, the conservative group has succeeded in keeping its power almost completely intact. It has taken advantage of a specific characteristic of Thai social transformation, whereby the transition from feudalistic to capitalistic society leaned on rather than destroyed the conservative force. Another important advantage is that the conservative group has at its disposal political institutions and the administrative apparatus which act to maintain its authority and occasionally prop up its power. They do so by creating movement after movement to rally public opinion around the consensus that only the force of the conservative group can preserve the most honourable institutions of the nation. The formation of public consciousness through State or military-owned mass media has also brought about another form of feudalistic thought.
The conservative group appears to steer economic development towards modern capitalism but in practice strongly resists such a development. Meanwhile, modern capitalists also do need to reform the bureaucracy for the economic system to work more efficiently. Reforming the economic and social development plans is also required to help expand trade and investments. The conservative group is to either participate in those plans or to be the first operator. The economic theorists who advise the bureaucracy, the so-called 'bureaucratic economists', tend to create obstructions to the monopoly capitalist groups.

Eventhough the development plans have brought the country into close relations with world capitalism the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB) stresses that the previous Plans (1 to 4) have emphasized too much the development of capital. Development plans, it seems, do not get along well with liberal capitalism.

Meanwhile, reforming the bureaucracy is the index of the actual influence of the old power. During the past three decades, many committees were appointed to do the task but all failed to score even minimal effect. In fact, although a reform of the bureaucracy is needed by both conservatives and capitalists, they can find only a few areas of agreement such the development of man-power efficiency or the control of expenses. For the rest, as changes would effect interests of each group they find it hard to come to terms. The direction taken by the reform or lack thereof has shown which group has more influence than the other. The conservatives and the capitalists, though they are two separate political forces, closely interrelate and share mutual interests in terms of joint trading and investment ventures. As a result, the economic and political movements of both groups have taken place along the same line. The NESDB disagrees with the monopoly system concerning over-development in industry and urbanisation, but it remains a political tool serving the capitalists. More than half of its plans are to promote accelerated development of the whole economic system.

The expansion of free capital and the social arousing of the middle classes are both important obstructions for the conservative group. The major policies and strategy of free capital have promoted capitalist groups and made state capital, which is the interests base of the conservative group, backward.
Many state enterprises operate at a loss. Their administrative and management skills are desperately incompetent when compared with those of private enterprises. Although the conservative group has much political power, it cannot withhold the growth of political influence of capital liberalism. A capitalist government is usually weakening the power of the conservative group, which ironically has to depend on the skills and efficiency of the capitalist group to evade a possible national economic crisis.

The political emergence of the middle class is not only an obstacle for the conservative group but also a positive factor for the capitalist group. The middle class are the one who campaigns for equal rights, freedom and country-wide development. They have as a rule adopted the economic patterns and ways of life of Western capitalist societies. Basically dissatisfied with the conservative system, they tend to promote an ideal capitalist liberalism. However, disappointed with the parliamentary system, their left-wing elements have turned to socialism.

Although the conservative group appears to be condemned by historical developments, the conservative military, the powerful element in the group, is still playing a most significant role in the maintaining of the stability and security of the nation. The military system is generally viewed as the only institution able to protect national independence and sovereignty. The military yardsticks are order, discipline, courage and a sense of sacrifice in the defence of the nation. In an unusual situation, where the nation's security and sovereignty are or appear to be at stake, participation of the conservative group in the government is considered a necessity.

The Progressive Military Group

Generally, military officers will cooperate with the conservative group in the government or admit liberal capitalism to participate in politics - as has been the case for half a century in Thailand since the overthrow of absolute monarchy in 1932. As capitalists have asserted themselves increasingly, first economically and then politically, military dictatorship has appeared doomed. A group of progressive officers has presented a new political ideology to maintain the military's role on the political scene in accordance with democratic principles and in order to fight against socialist tendencies among the lower
classes. This group first appeared under the label of ‘democratic soldiers’ and ‘Young Turks’. Later, as followers of such high-ranking officers as Gen. Chawalit Yongchaiyut, they issued the notorious policy orders 66/2523 (1980) and 66/2525 (1982). The failed coup attempt on 1 April 1981 took care of the ‘Young Turks’

After the political and military failure of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) and the return of defectors to the fold, these liberal officers tried to step forward in politics. A noted move was the military’s attempt, geared by these officers, to amend the Constitution and reduce the power of political parties representing the capitalist group. However, the move was defeated by a vigorous opposition that consisted of the political parties and the middle classes. This group of liberal officers came up with the avowed purpose of “supporting free competition and eliminating every kind of economic monopoly”, thus declaring itself as an enemy of capitalist parties. These progressive officers have two important characteristics:

1) Their policies will support state capital. When there is no large monopoly capital in the private sector, the largest capital that has no competition is state capital.

2) These officers are progressive. They support state capital for national development. Their philosophy could be called ‘national socialism’. They have paid special attention to the creation of labour committees and mass political movements: this shows that they are interested in the new trends of Thai politics.

**The Large - Scale Holding Capitalist Group**

This group is the most important political force for the future of Thailand, because of its financial strength and because it is in tune with Western politics.

It gives the most support to political parties and even sets up its own. The actual policies of most political parties are thus directly concerned with gaining or losing this group’s favours. At the same time, the capitalist group also lends some cooperation and support to the conservative group since it depends on the mechanisms of power that the latter control to run and expand its business.
As a matter of fact, Thai history shows that the capitalist group is not a good agent to fight for ideal liberal democracy. The parties it sets up or supports have no sufficient strength or ideology to produce good politicians. Although the military is a major obstacle to democracy, prevailing corruption and lack of understanding of social issues prevents the capitalist-dominated political parties from turning out dedicated and efficient members and leaders. Their elected representatives are too busy keeping their votes and their place on the political stage.

In the long history of popular strife against power abuse, no political party has ever taken the lead. The parties will assume an active role only when the interests of the capitalists stand to be compromised. In a coup situation, they would simply dissolve themselves and stop all activities, leaving the people to fight alone.

However, since the weakening of the old military regime in late 1973, the capitalist group has played an increasingly important role. As a rule, the various pressure groups, interest groups, nationalist groups and the middle classes have tended to consider political parties as being on the opposite side of dictatorship, without much bothering to analyse their programmes and purposes. Indeed, most parties have little or no political philosophy whatsoever. Under their aegis, the future course of democracy in Thailand is thus unpredictable and might well be a case, as the Thai saying has it, of “dying at the next sword” -letting the future take care of itself.

Many analysts contend that, despite their ties to capitalists and poor democratic background, political parties somehow are proceeding through the stages of the democratic process. The existence of political parties and an elected Parliament provide a measure of ‘discipline’ and eventually the people may have a chance to seek full justice under the rule of law, something unthinkable under a military system.

This kind of analysis is somewhat simplistic as it implies that there are only two alternatives: rule by military dictatorship or political parties, no more, no less. As such, it fails to look deeper into the structural aspect of political parties.

In Thai politics, the richest member of a party has the best chances to be the most influential. Qualified members are quite rare. Most of them
gradually leave their ideals behind and concentrate on working for the benefit of their party if not of their own. Hence, to say that political parties stand on the side of democracy still raises a lot of questions. Why, for example, do they choose such non-democratic methods as making payments to gain votes both in elections and in Parliament?

Except a few small parties which stick to their democratic principles and exert negligible influence, political parties tend to support the growth of laissez-faire, and the only 'democracy' among them is merely a reflection of popular wishful thinking.

**The Petite Bourgeoisie**

As a political force, the petite bourgeoisie has the least unified political stance. Fundamentally, it has little interest to preserve and no power to direct any political change. Yet more often than not, it becomes an essential variable. Especially during the last decade, this political force has been persuaded repeatedly to join the activities of one group or another. Though not endowed with political strength, it is regarded as an elite of intelligence, voicing social attitudes and requirements.

Only a minority of petit bourgeois own their own businesses; the majority do not earn income from capital utilisation but from salaries. They are dispersed in business organisations, private institutions and government units.

The petit bourgeois are always well disposed towards liberal democracy. This is due to their education and their belief in Western style democracy. Whatever their reservations about this or that party, they always assume that political parties as a whole stand on the opposite side of the military and thus represent democracy. Unless acting as a vanguard in some political movement they would play only a supportive role.

By nature, members of this class consider that their best chance of progress is through career promotions and a gradual accumulation of capital giving them sufficient means to maintain 'decent' standards of living. They are considered as an inert political force, unless called upon to play a leading role in times of political crisis when it is necessary to stimulate a power group.
The petit bourgeois, especially those students who played a significant role in Thai politics during the mid 1970s, used to express many leading ideas in politics and even led some political movements. Since 1980, however, when the student forces were subdued, their movement has taken the form of studying the problems of Thai society, a harmless enough pursuit laced with trivial criticism without any practical impact. What they will do in the future is an interesting point. If they could come up with their own ideas and find a suitable role, they might regain their position as a political vanguard, because present political forces fail to obtain full support from the people due to the weakness of their policy and strategy.

The Labour Group

In theory, and according to historical evidence, the lowest class in society often provides the main base for revolution and the advent of socialism. However, History also shows that the labour force has often been led to support political groups which were its enemies. In the case of Thailand, the working class has tried repeatedly, though not systematically, to campaign for its own benefit.

Most movements this class has been involved with have emphasized economic affairs, only some labour organisations have moved to support the military group or political parties with the view that the working class must have a political party of its own. Nevertheless, for a variety of reasons, the movements they chose to support were considered as serving the purposes of other classes, and hence it can be concluded that the labour movement in Thailand so far has no political strategy. There has been no coordination among labour sub-groups, each of them fighting for their own interests at the expense of others. This and the destructive interference from other forces have meant consistent weakening of the labour movement. An important point is that unless it manages to consolidate and develop its strength, its leaders’ risk dependence on backers who belong to other classes. It is, therefore, doubtful whether its leaders are able to lead the movement for the genuine benefit of the working class.

After the downfall of the Thanom-Prapas military dictatorship on 14 October 1973, the Thai labour movement took part in many significant
economic and political developments, but without being united. Some supported socialist-inclined forces, including the upholders of ‘democracy’, while the others supported the conservative group. However, both supporters of ‘democracy’ and supporters of the conservatives seem to have declined substantially in the last few years due to differences in their fundamental interests. The key question is which political party they might support in the near future.

The Peasantry

After the CPT ended its political role in late 1980, the movement of farmers was also subdued fundamentally. These days, peasants are always persuaded to move for the benefit of other classes, - be it the conservatives who inculcated them with the sakdina (Thai feudalism) ideology or the political parties which claim to be their representatives, and have introduced a lot of economic changes in their name. However, the problem of rural poverty remains unsolved and the peasants themselves feel that not even political parties can solve it. They live a lowly, hand-to-mouth existence. Rural Thailand is thus a major arena from which a political force could gather support to boost its bargaining power.

Given the trends of the various groups mentioned above, it is clear that Thai politics remain tied up with the power of the upper class. Political rallies and campaigns so far have not been ‘the politics of the people’. Both the middle class and the lower class have to follow the pattern led by the upper class. Despite an appearance of progress, it will take a long time before this pattern is changed.

What has been stated about the characteristics and trends of political forces in Thai society is only a bird’s eye view. However, three important points should be noticed in the new trend:

1) Actual policy and strategy of each groups are the only two indicators of their future trends. Each movement they make will indicate which side they are on.

2) Policy and strategy are subject to change as the situation evolves. The actual political position can only be understood through a thorough analysis of the specific context.

3) In any given political situation, there is always a neutral side with any number of transmission groups ready to change allegiance.