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SLEEPING GIANT AWAKENS? : THE MIDDLE CLASS IN THAI POLITICS

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INTRODUCTION

Nothing portrays the cyclical nature of Thai politics better than the ironic fact that the military takeover on February 23, 1991, on the eve of the 60th anniversary of Thai democracy, made the number of coup attempts in this country just equal to that of general elections, that is 17. In spite of this gloomy figure, fledgling democracy in this coup-ridden country has indeed made some progress over the last two decades. Most importantly, there have been signs that the fragile democratic process is finding its social base in the middle class. The proxy of this class—college students—emerged first in the early 1970s and heroically brought down a seemingly invincible military regime. As a result, in a marked departure from the first 40 years of Thai democracy, over the late 1970s and the entire 1980s certain elements in civil society—political parties, politicians, student activists, academics, the business community, and the press—wrested a sizable share of power from the military-bureaucratic elite.

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The February 23, 1991 coup was a major setback to the process of democratization. However, before political despair reigned the day, a new hope was pinned on the middle class proper, whose showdown of force was as colorful as that of their proxy two decades earlier. From the last months of 1991 to April and May of 1992, young men and women of the business-oriented middle class--cladded in office suits, riding in sedans, and carrying mobile telephones--took to the streets and formed the backbone of the demonstration that eventually brought about the collapse of the military-backed government. Common wisdom has heralded the politicization of the middle class throughout these months as a case of "sleeping giant awakens."\textsuperscript{1} That is only partly true, though. A major argument of this paper is that while the middle class are truly a new political giant and the future of democracy cannot be fully assessed without scrutinizing their role, this class has not been "fully asleep" until recently. On the contrary, the middle class have been a potent factor in politics since the 1980s. Just as they were a major cause for the return of democracy in 1992, they were a force that facilitated the military seizure of power one year earlier.

In this connection I set myself the task of showing that the recent failure of democratic consolidation has been conditioned to a large extent by the unwillingness of the middle class to accept neither a corrupted and unprincipled democracy, nor an outdated and internationally outcasted authoritarianism. For democ-

\textsuperscript{1} Anawus Chettana, "Sleeping Giant Awakens" The Nation June 22, 1992, C-1.
racy to survive, it needs the support of the middle class. To enlist the help of the middle class to prop up the faltering democracy, we must address their desire for a governance which is more equipped with integrity, efficiency, and professionalism. No less important, the middle class need a new political outlook which entails an exceptional patience with the incremental improvement of the democratization process as well as an outright rejection of military intervention as an alternative to corrupted democracy.

THE RISE OF THE MIDDLE CLASS

Thailand has had a non-bureaucratic middle class population since the time of the great political and economic transformation launched by the modernizing monarchs during the latter half of the last century and the early part of the present century. Yet, the size of this intermediate class was until recently small and its political impact minimal. The press community was probably the only section of the middle class which held a substantial influence. Size, however, was not the only factor responsible for their passivity; the social and political circumstances surrounding the Thai polity and certain political choices made by its leaders also hindered a political emergence of the middle class.

To begin with, rather than seeking after a solid support from the middle class, or the mass for that matter, the 1932-overthrow of the absolute monarchy was the work of a coup group comprising a handful of middle-ranking military officers and civilian officials of the state. The coup group had a chance to transform itself into a mass party after its victory, for right after the end of
the coup there were as many as 10,000 people—presumably largely from a middle-class background—signing up for the new membership of the group.\(^2\)

Fearing that the opposition—mainly the royalty and the aristocracy—would band together and manipulate electoral politics to undermine its newly acquired power, the new regime banned all political parties and party membership.\(^3\) Instead, the post-1932 regime chose to base itself on military support and the creation of a constitution which allowed for the appointment of one half of the members of the unicameral parliament. Moreover, military officers and civilian officials were legally permitted to concurrently hold political appointments.

Such being the case, the post-1932 leaders did not have to rely on the consent of the populace and electoral results as much as their ability to stage or suppress a coup attempt. The rhetoric of its leaders about democratic idealism to the contrary, most of the late 1940s and the entire 1950s saw Thailand succumb to the rule of successive military regimes which rose to power largely through the use of force.

The political inertia of the middle class was also caused by the fact that a large part of them, especially small traders and shopkeepers, were of Chinese ancestry.

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\(^2\) Reported at that time by a Thai newspaper, Srikung, quoted by Benjamin A. Batson, *The End of the Absolute Monarchy in Siam* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1934, pp. 265-266, end note #13.

\(^3\) As late as 1937 even Pridi Panomyong, one of the liberal leaders of the 1932 coup group, was at odds with the notion of having political parties.
and thus burdened with the stigma of being aliens. Added to that, Thailand lacked social and political upheavals, such as anti-colonial experience or defeat in major wars, which could have galvanized people into political action. Last but not least, except for the existence of sizable Chinese and Muslim minorities, Thailand, by Third World standards, has been a land of exceptional social and cultural homogeneity. Racial, linguistic, and religious issues have largely failed to drive people, including the middle class, into the political arena.

Despite the small size and modest influence of the middle class, some powerful leaders of the military-bureaucratic regimes were visionary enough to nurture this class and garner from them, in addition to the top brass, support for their rule. Among the many purposes of Marshal Plaek Pibunsongkram and Luang Wijit Watakans in restricting economic activities of the alien Chinese business in the 1940s, while assisting small private businesses and cooperatives run by native Thais, was the creation of a new middle class of local origin. Luang Wichit Watakans wrote in a book published around 1947:

The function of the state in a nationalist regime is to make everyone owner of necessary capital and production tools...and earn more than enough to cover family expenses and education bills of his children; particularly, to make everyone have enough saving to weather a bad time. Indeed this is (the creation of) a middle class.⁴

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However, it was under the premiership of Marshal Sarit, who ruled Thailand between 1957 and 1963, that vigorous development efforts were made to enlarge the size of the middle class. As premier, Sarit once made an eloquent speech:

The best means to build a stable nation...is to foster the growth of the middle class so that it gets larger than any other class...to follow several small European countries such as Denmark, Holland, Sweden, and Switzerland, in having a sizable middle class... I firmly believe that the bigger this class is, the better we are able to build a new society endowed with peace and prosperity.⁵

Sarit's approach to middle class formation departed from that of the previous nationalist regimes of the 1940s and early 1950s in that it was based more on market forces than on official sponsorship. Under his leadership, domestic private initiative, as well as foreign assistance and investment, steadily replaced the state as the locomotive of growth. The policy impact of Sarit in terms of economic growth outlives his regime. During the 1960s Thailand became one of the world's fastest-growing economies, registering an average annual growth of 7-8 per cent. As a result, the middle class, especially in Bangkok and major provincial cities, grew substantially. According to one source, the number of people working in the professional and administrative sectors (which may be con-

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veniently used as an equivalent to the size of the middle class) rose from about 200,000 in 1960 to 530,000 in 1970, while the total economically active population of the country amounted to 13.8 and 16.8 million respectively.\(^6\)

However, within the first decade of the free market-oriented development efforts initiated by Sarit, government officials still heavily dominated the professional and administrative occupational groups. State-employed persons represented as much as 70.4 per cent and 86.3 per cent of those working under the professional and administrative categories.\(^7\) Entrepreneurs might have increased in number and economic strength considerably, but the relative size of the salaried middle class in the private sector, as compared with that of the bureaucratic middle class, continued to be modest by the end of the 1960s. But, the impact of economic growth on the creation of a politically active middle class was immense anyway, in that it turned out a much larger corp of college students--which may be regarded as the proxy or the proto-type of the non-bureaucratic middle class yet to rise. In 1961 only 15,000 students were enrolled in five universities all over the country; by 1972, there were as many as 100,000 enrolled in seventeen.\(^8\) It was a large number of these students who took to the streets in 1973 demanding the resignation of the military leaders.

\(^6\) Ben Anderson, "Withdrawal Symptom" Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars (July-September, 1977), Table I, p. 16.
\(^7\) Ibid., Table II, p. 16.
\(^8\) Ibid., p. 16.
If, among the non-bureaucratic forces, college students were in the political time light in the early 1970s for their toppling of the military government, business entrepreneurs--large and small, national and local--received most public attention in the late 1970s and the entire 1980s, for their reigning over the emerging electoral politics. The five general elections held between 1975 and 1986 returned business-background politicians as the largest group in the House of Representatives, making up about one-third of the total House membership. Equally important, almost half of the positions of the five cabinets formed between March 1980 and August 1986 were filled with businessmen-cum-politicians. Unsurprisingly, layman conversation, press reports, and scholarly studies over the 1970s and the 1980s were centered around the domineering position of big businesses in politics and the crucial part played by mafia-type businessmen in elections on the one hand, and the role of the student-academic activists and trade unions in the protest and demonstration movements, on the other.

Despite the modest attention they received from the academia and the press in terms of political influence, the ranks of the middle class steadily expanded. Sustained economic growth over the next two decades, particularly the annual double-digit growth for three consecutive years at the close of the 1980s, generated a much larger number of professionals or salaried administrators or executives in the

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private sector. As Rudiger Korff puts it, the average annual growth rate of the "professionals" nation-wide was 12.8 per cent over the 1975-1986 period, far exceeding the rate of 3.6 per cent for the total labor force. In Bangkok alone the professionals accounted for about 21 percent of the total population in 1975; but the figure rose to almost 30 percent by 1986.\(^\text{10}\)

From a regional perspective, among the five large ASEAN nations at the opening of the 1980s the relative size of the Thai middle class was ranked fourth, after Singapore, Malaysia, and the Phillipines. As Harold Crouch puts it, about 4.4 per cent of the Thai population in 1980 belonged to the "solid" middle class ("professionals," "technicals," "administratives," "executives," "managerials") ; whereas the corresponding figures for Singapore, Malaysia, the Phillipines and Indonesia were 13.6 per cent, 7 percent, 6.7 percent, and 3.2 percent respectively.\(^\text{11}\) However, by 1986 Thailand seemed to have surpassed the Phillipines in this sense. Using the number of televisions, cars, and telephones per one million population as indicators of the size of the middle class, Thailand ranked behind Singapore and Malaysia only. Of course one may argue that the Phillipines has been in steady decline over the last two decades; yet, the gap between Malaysia and Thailand from 1986 to 1991 seemed to have narrowed more so in all categories as well. (See Tables I, II, and III below).

\(^{10}\) Rudiger Korff, *Bangkok and Modernity* (Bangkok: CUSRI, 1989), Table 2, pp. 42-43.

Table I: Numbers of televisions, telephones, and cars per one million population in the five major ASEAN nations in 1981.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Televisions</th>
<th>Telephones</th>
<th>Cars</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>139,420</td>
<td>292,500</td>
<td>63,573</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>63,759</td>
<td>31,772</td>
<td>48,703</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>20,450</td>
<td>9,039</td>
<td>9,808</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>28,807</td>
<td>8,693</td>
<td>6,481</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>11,409</td>
<td>3,921</td>
<td>4,362</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Far Eastern Economic Review Asia Year Book 1982

Table II: Numbers of televisions, telephones, and cars per one million population in the five major ASEAN nations in 1986.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Televisions</th>
<th>Telephones</th>
<th>Cars</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>185,349</td>
<td>415,385</td>
<td>85,107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>106,962</td>
<td>59,494</td>
<td>87,975</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>36,145</td>
<td>15,181</td>
<td>6,267</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>66,288</td>
<td>13,068</td>
<td>17,803</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>33,848</td>
<td>4,925</td>
<td>5,862</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Far Eastern Economic Review Asia Year Book 1987

Table III: Numbers of televisions, telephones, and cars per one million population in the five major ASEAN nations in 1991

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Televisions</th>
<th>Telephones</th>
<th>Cars</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>205,357</td>
<td>435,714</td>
<td>102,413</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>95,137</td>
<td>86,339</td>
<td>102,413</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>54,559</td>
<td>14,254</td>
<td>7,296</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>95,064*</td>
<td>24,348</td>
<td>38,261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>50,584</td>
<td>9,041</td>
<td>9,592</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Far Eastern Economic Review Asia Year Book 1991; *information for 1988

The 1980s decade was pivotal to the making of the middle class not only by adding a large number of new members to this class, but also by preparing the intellectual ground for their subsequent role in politics. To begin with, there was a marked shift in the official
attitude regarding the part played by the private actors in public affairs. Through trade associations and chambers of commerce, businesses were accorded a remarkable role in the economic decision-making of the state. At the opening of the decade Premier Prem initiated several high-powered forums for government-business policy dialogues at the central as well as local levels. That the state became much more receptive to the public policy role of private businesses had been prompted very much by alarming trade and current deficits which rocketed the international debts of the country to an unprecedented height. By 1980 Thailand's annual growth in external indebtedness was more than triple the average rate of all less developed countries, exceeding even that of the Philippines. (See Tables IV and V below). Associated with the rising external indebtedness were the rising energy costs and international recession and inflation. Several government and business leaders therefore deemed the difficult time at the opening of the decade as no less critical than the one that had precipitated the overthrow of the absolute monarchy in the early 1930s.

Table IV Trade Deficits and Current Account Deficits as Percentages of GNP, 1960-1980

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trade Deficits</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Account Deficits</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table V Growth in External Indebtedness of Selected Less Developed Countries (Per cent per Annum).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year/Period</th>
<th>1971-75</th>
<th>1975-80</th>
<th>1978</th>
<th>1979</th>
<th>1980</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>34.6</td>
<td>39.6</td>
<td>47.4</td>
<td>47.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>16.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>31.6</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All LDCs</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Encouraged and assisted by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, the Thai government set the first half of the 1980s for a structural adjustment reform in which the economic role of the state-in entrepreneurial activities as well as infrastructure development was curtailed, while that of the private sector was augmented. The major reason for placing an emphasis on the private sector was simple: much of the external indebtedness was due to the rise in the public sector deficit. (For example, during 1979-1980 the annual ratio of the public sector deficit to GDP rose from 5.1 per cent to 8 per cent).

To encourage businesses to take a more active economic role, the government provided them with incentives and advice to shift towards a more profitable export-oriented direction. The government also
encouraged the private sector to invest in highly expensive transportation and communication enterprises. To help businesses move from the traditional import-substitution strategy to the uncharted water of export-oriented strategy, the government needed to give the private sector more say in public decision-making, so that much-needed information on the problems and opportunities existing in various export sectors could be intelligently collected. Throughout the Prem premiership (1980-1988) business succeeded in bringing to the national attention some burning issues, such as the need to streamline the export machinery of the government, the need to reduce business costs unreasonably caused by public policies or officials, and the need to update or revise outdated or cumbersome regulations and rules. The relevant point is that, through their constant contribution to public policy-making, businesses were publicly seen in a new light—not as alien exploiters but as indispensable partners in development. The public status of the private sector also increased considerably with the decision by the state to let it take a prominent role in transportation and communications development, an area usually associated with national security and hence reserved for the state.

In conclusion, a part of civil society-business—came to be seen as a legitimate and indispensable actor in public affairs. Yet business was not the only societal group to have gained access to public

decision-making in the 1980s. At the other end of the spectrum, non-profit private agencies have been involved in social and development work since the mid-1970s (the so-called "NGOs"). These also won a place in the development policy-making of the state. By the early 1980s the NESDB, the official central planning agency, made it clear that the state would seek help from the burgeoning middle-class-led NGOs for its development efforts. In 1985 about 140 private agencies active in rural development were invited to work with the NESDB to formulate guidelines for joint public-private development cooperation.

Three reasons seem to account for the new found positive attitude of the state towards these private agencies. Firstly, just as it had to make strenuous efforts to increase private business participation in those profitable development related activities, the resource-constrained state could not help but collaborate with altruistic private groups to shore up its non-profit development tasks. Secondly, the collapse of the Communise-inspired insurgency made the idea of having private groups doing fieldwork in the rural villages or urban slums more palatable to the state. Last, but not least, just as the support from the World Bank and the IMF helped in the case of allowing businesses to prosper even in traditionally sensitive sectors, the shift in the foreign aid community towards a participatory and indigenous approach to development eased political tension for domestic leaders who had opted to give a prominent place to the non-state development forces.

By the late 1980s the state had intellectually prepared itself to see the forces in civil society--especially
those at the upper and middle level of society—assuming a more active and legitimate role in public affairs. Conversely, civil society, the middle class in particular, found a new sense of public responsibility and political self-efficacy. However, when the politically conscious middle class turned to the realities of democratic politics, they were disillusioned with seemingly senseless bickering and unprofessional manoeuvring for vested interests among party leaders and politicians.

The political pessimism of the middle class was shaped by various opinion-making groups. The military, to be sure, did not fail to deliver harsh criticisms of political parties and elected politicians. By the late 1970s the military leadership had come to the conclusion that to vanquish the Communist insurgents, democracy was urgently needed, for it was the only system capable of weaning people from the Communist persuasion. However, for several military strategists, democracy in practice failed to take root in this country mainly because of the greedy and irresponsible behavior of business-based politicians. For military leaders, political parties in Thailand were nothing more than self-seeking business concerns in disguise. It was common, therefore, for the top brass to portray politicians in a bad light. For example, in early 1983 General Pijit Kullawani (the commander of the most powerful Bangkok-based army division), in his defence of the military effort to fix the constitution to halt the introduction of a new party-based electoral system, admonished the TV audience with the assertion that without the proposed amendment the system would admit only the "capitalists" into parliament.
At times the generals also had harsh words for the apparent incompetence of elected politicians. Deep down in their hearts they were unhappy having to work under, and having to defer to, a civilian government made up largely of "lowly educated" and "boorish-mannered" politicians. In the same military effort to fix the constitution mentioned above, the outspoken Arthit Kamlang-ek, army commander-in-chief, justified his demand for the retention of the authority of the government-appointed and military-dominated Senate with these words:

While we are (in general) in great shortage of highly qualified (politically and administratively) personnel, you have to admit that, we have plenty of valuable human resources in the permanent bureaucracy... (On the other hand) our politicians are still incompetent. How come we pick anyone (just because he is an elected politician) for a ministerial post, having then an authority over (the more qualified) permanent officials. This is doomed to failure. Some (elected politicians) just do not have the competence needed for the assigned job.\(^{13}\)

In a lecture delivered in that same year and attended by a large number of high-ranking government officials on the revolutionary situation, the brilliant strategist General Chavalit Yongjaiyut stated in the same vein:

\(^{13}\) Chalermkiat, op cit, pp. 100-101.
Nowadays, Thailand has two policies to solve national problems. There is the political party policy, proposed to the Parliament by the government, and the policy of the National Army, the policy to defeat the Communists...But facts, reasons, and theory prove that the National Army can solve national problems, namely to win over the CPT, while the political party policy has not succeeded in solving any problem.\textsuperscript{14}

No less important, academics and the press contributed greatly to the critical scrutiny of the political conditions of the 1980s. Where as much of the influential academic literature of the 1970s had been quasi-Marxist, stressing the undesirable bourgeois class characteristics of democratic rule, the literature of the 1980s focused less on the structural or class questions but much more on exposing concrete, derisive acts of money-dumping and vote-buying in elections, corruption, and the pervasive use of patronage or spoil in conducting government and party affairs. The view of the scholars went along quite well with press criticisms of the "Thai-style democracy", many reports pointed to the unprincipled electoral behavior of both candidates and voters. Stories about rich guys dumping a lot of money in elections anticipating opportunities to amass even greater fortunes

through government contracts, concessions, commissions or other kinds of under-the-table money, were common knowledge among the newspaper readership. To cynical readers, most of whom belonged to the middle class, democracy--due to the ignorance of the electorate and the insatiable greed of the businessmen-cum-politicians--sadly turned into a leadership which was unqualified, unprincipled and self-seeking.

Military, academic and press criticisms of political parties and politicians were occasionally substantiated by the words in the mouths of the politicians themselves. For example, there was once a press report that Secretary-General Banharn Silpa-archa of the business-oriented Chat Thai Party was very much afraid of being an opposition party again, having been left out in the cold for two years. Banharn reportedly confided that the party rank and file were fed up with the opposition role since their livelihood had been so miserable. His statement was taken as a testament to the fact that there were a good many personal, illegitimate gains to be grabbed by cabinet members. Apart from the printed media, TV news was crucial to the shaping of the political views of the middle class in the 1980s. As the reader may realize, the number of TV sets per one million population increased markedly from 28,807 in 1981 to 66,288 in 1986, and 95,064 in 1991. At the same time TV news programs were considerably liberalized and privatized in the 1980s. Private companies were for the first time allowed to lease out news programs from state-controlled stations, and they were able to turn traditionally lifeless reports into popular, yet highly informative, programs, resulting in a huge increase in TV news audiences.
Although the middle class took little conspicuous political action, their approval or support—tacit or explicit—were very much sought after by power contenders. The middle class views were usually inferred from what was being covered by news reporters or what was being advocated by influential columnists in the daily press, which was the most liberal of all the media. However, in the mid-1980s there emerged a more direct indicator of the middle class action than mere press coverage and columnist viewpoints, that is, a shift in the voting preferences of the middle-class-dominated electorate of Bangkok. Around 1985 a political movement focusing on "making politics virtuous" was initiated by Chamlong Srimuang, a former military officer known for his exceptional integrity and ascetic, almost spartan, life-style, and devout Buddhist faith. Chamlong presented himself and his followers as an alternative to prevailing "dirty" politicians. Contending the Bangkok governorship in 1985 against candidates who were much better financed, Chamlong impressed the Bangkok voters with his image as a principled and dedicated politician, as well as his vow to purify politics. His strategy paid off and he won an upset landslide victory. Observers took Chamlong’s victory as a sign of middle class protest against old-style politicians and a call for a new kind of leadership more compatible with their values.

In other words, by the late 1980s the middle class--much larger in size and highly diversified in origin--were highly at ease with democracy in theory, yet cynical of it in practice. Frustrations were constantly built up over what were seen as flaws or disgusting deviations of "Thai-style democracy" from an ideal one.
However, many were comforted by the fact that the existing system was not a full-blown democracy. Rather, the system at work until mid-1988 was a power-sharing scheme in which political parties and the military-technocrat alliance were counterpoised in opposition to each other. To ensure political continuity, the ruling parties were for eight years obliged to band together behind Premier Prem Tinsulanond, a former army commander-in-chief and well respected figure in military circles. In return for his acceptance of the premiership, Prem--neither a party man nor an elected politician--was empowered by government parties to appoint his trusted aides to strategic cabinet posts, especially the Ministry of Finance. Unlike most party leaders, Prem and his non-party cabinet members were hailed for their integrity and honesty. The press and the public alike believed that, with Prem at the helm of the ship of the state, corruption was contained, since the top leadership did not play along. Likewise, the middle class’s fear of having unqualified politicians running the state was allayed by Premier Prem’s placement of capable non-partisans in key cabinet positions and his delegation of much authority to career officials of the Ministry of Finance, the NESDB, and the Bank of Thailand.

On the whole the middle class, whose political position as inferred from press opinion, were at peace with the semi-democratic regime under Premier Prem. In spite of their worries with the performance of elected politicians, they, for example, were up against the intimidating efforts in 1983 by the top brass to fix the constitution, to put the country several years back in terms of political development. The middle class were also united behind Prem in late 1984 when the
army blatantly forced the government to reverse its previous decision on a 15-per cent baht devaluation.\textsuperscript{15}

\textbf{THE MIDDLE CLASS AND THE ROAD TO THE 1991 COUP}

As soon as Prem turned down another offer of the premiership in August 1989, power was passed on to Chatichai Choonhavan, leader of the Chat Thai party, and for the first time in more than a decade an entirely elected government was inaugurated. For the middle class in some quarters it was a cause to celebrate; yet in other quarters, grave concerns about the integrity and technical competence of elected leaders reemerged. From the start, several members of the Chatichai cabinet were ridiculed for their corruption-tainted record and dubious administrative experience.

In retrospect the Chatichai government was in many ways, to say the least, as effective as any military-dominated government (even the Prem-led one, for that matter). To start with, under this government economic growth which was the envy of the world was the order of the day and Thailand was widely hailed as being on the edge of joining the ranks of the East Asian NICs, until the Gulf Crisis loomed. During the Chatichai administration Thailand took a more

independent line of action vis-a-vis its traditional major power ally—the United States—while becoming much more amiable and conciliatory towards Vietnam and the Phnom Penh regime, its traditional adversaries. Finally, it was under Chatichai—after some hesitation, though—that legislation on the press was liberalized, that the controversial social security act was adopted, and that the ban on commercial logging was imposed, all of which signify some social and environmental concern on the part of the regime.

Be that as it may, to the educated urbanites the sign of good government was not only its performance but also its integrity and honesty, and never would the two be interchangeable. In less than one year the Chatichai premiership came to be plagued with vociferous allegations of government corruption. The truth has never been settled as to whether or not corruption was really pervasive, but the perception of pervasive impropriety and irregularity was certainly real. The perception was probably caused in part by the departure of Prem and the non-partisan cabinet members, leaving behind only those who were widely seen as the champions of vested interests. The nagging suspicion was all the more aggravated by the belief that the kickbacks received by corrupt politicians must have been astronomical and the public interest at stake unprecedentedly high, now that the economy was growing at a superstar rate and the state was briskly taking up multi-billion infrastructure megaprojects. No less relevant, rumors and allegations of government misdeeds naturally drew much attention and travelled fast under a more fully democratic regime.
In March the influential Sayam Rath Weekly (March 26-April 1, 1989) carried an article entitled "Corruption: A Precondition for a Coup," featuring the efforts by opposition MPs to censure the government on alleged corruption. The opposition politicians reportedly warned the government to take remedial action on this problem before the military used it as a justification for yet another coup attempt. Only six months later the public mood seemed to escalate to the point that that same weekly (December 17-23, 1989) ran the front page story titled "Corruption: A Bad Omen for the Chatichai Administration?" The front page article had it that even some cabinet members or leaders of government parties had hinted that ongoing allegations against government integrity were not groundless. The Democrat Party (probably the only coalition partner whose reputation had not been tarnished by graft-related scandals), reportedly said that it was resolved to hang in with the cabinet just to block as much as was possible any "crooks" from a busing public authority for their illegitimate benefits. Defense Minister Chavalit Yongjaiyut cited an Australian report that among the most corrupted Pacific Rim nations Thailand ranked the ninth. Lastly, Kukrit Pramoj, former premier and respected statesman, dealt Chatichai a heavy blow when he contemptuously asked from the government a one-year moratorium on corruption for the sake of the nation (pp. 8-9)

As under the Prem premiership, well-known academics spoke out against corruption in line with the journalists, mostly via interviews or writings in popular dailies or weeklies. Likhit Dhiravegin of Thammasat University, derisively termed Chatichai's government "plutocracy," or, worse than that, a "buffet cabinet,"
referring to the chaotic, free-for-all scrambling for under-the-table money.\textsuperscript{16} Disturbed by what he saw as the flippant, arrogant and unprincipled conduct of government leaders, Khien Teerawit, a foreign specialist at Chulalongkorn University, wrote:

This country has a number of people who do anything at whim, claiming that they are popularly elected. These people have (indeed) bought their way up to power, have they not? Such being the case, what is the difference (in terms of political legitimacy) between their power grabbing and the military seizure of power?\textsuperscript{17}

If Likhit thought that plutocracy was the undesirable reality of Thai politics and Khien went further in saying that it was as bad as a military takeover, then Pongpen Sakuntapai—a Chulalongkorn expert on constitutional law—went furthest when he said that:

(In these days) if I have to live under despotism, I’d rather opt for a military dictatorship than han an elected government of the crooked businessmen—cumpoliticians (Toorakitkit Karnmuang, to say his Thai term literally).\textsuperscript{18}


\textsuperscript{17} Sayam Rath Weekly, November 18, 1990, p. 17.

\textsuperscript{18} Ekalak, October 12, 1990, p. 15
On the whole the press and the academic community were at one in seeing a strong connection between pervasive vote-buying in rural areas and government corruption. In their view, either the need for massive vote-buying money necessitated blatant corruption or, conversely, the relative ease of taking bribes or plundering the coffers of the state once getting into positions of power rendered money-dumping in elections more than worthwhile.

On top of the negative judgements of the journalists and the academics were critiques made by NGO leaders. These idealist reformers were, generally, not interested in exposing corruption. They were instead disturbed by what they perceived as the excessively pro-business or pro-growth orientation of the elected government, at the cost of social and environmental degradation. But they, of course, saw the connection between having a legion of businessmen running the state and such deplorable social and environmental negligences. Prawase Wasi, doctor and social critic, put it this way,

The entry of businessmen into politics naturally makes the government overly concerned with commerce and private businesses...and hardly appreciative of the humanitarian, social, and environmental sides of the story.19

By late 1990 came student activists who rocked the Chatichai administration not only with words but

also sporadic political rallies. Much publicized was the case of a Ramkamhaeng student setting himself on fire in October 1990. That ill-fated student had demonstrated, along with scores of his colleagues, against Chatichai mainly over the issue of corruption, and eventually made a suicide threat to force the government to resign. Weeks before the February 1991 coup struck, the Federation of Students of Thailand organized a series of public seminars on corruption at Thammasat University to rally the masses to the cause of forcing Chatichai to address the public distrust of his government.

Such were the words and deeds of the intellectual or the activist wings of the middle class. The great majority of the Bangkok middle class seemed to have followed the lead of their referent groups as evidenced by another big triumph won by Chamlong and his "clean politics" movement in their reelection bid for the Bangkok governorship in 1989. In 1990 a candidate of the Chamlong-led party, the PDP, also won an upset victory in a by-election in a Bangkok constituency for a vacant seat in the House of Representatives. It must be emphasized, however, that the middle class spokesmen, cynical of the tarnished government though they might have been, were cautious enough not to openly "knock on the door of the barracks." The Far Eastern Economic Review observed that as late as December 1990:

...(P)olitically aware Thais, particularly in Bangkok, are on balance in favour of preserving the democratic gains won so far than allowing the military to step in...20

The journal then went on to say that, when the leading opposition party--Solidarity--bought full-page advertisements in several newspapers in November 1990 to attack the government for plunging the nation into confusion and devisiveness, "it was careful enough to plead with the military for patience and for the resolution of problems through democratic means."\(^{21}\) Likewise, students did not fail to remind their audiences in public seminars held shortly before the February 1991 coup that they were not seeking an "extra-constitutional" way out of crisis. Finally, in his last ditch plea to save democratic government, the academic-cum-activist Sukhumbhand Paribatra wrote:

At stake is not only the fate of one government, but also perhaps the future of the present democratic system. Without major changes in the constitution and the political parties structures, money is likely to continue to play a key role in electoral processes, thus breeding corruption and eroding the system's legitimacy.\(^{22}\)

Damaging as they were, corruption allegations would not have resulted in the downfall of democracy, if the armed forces had not felt great enmity towards the Chatichai administration. The trouble first appeared as quarrels between Chatchai's trusted aides and the top brass. At the heart of the matter was that the fiercely proud military officers felt extremely indignant that their system and leaders were being

\(^{21}\) Ibid., p. 11.
criticized "unrespectfully" by civilians. The mutual animosity went up when Premier Chaitichai, compelled to dismiss (unreasonably as he thought) a "trouble-maker" from his cabinet, reacted with all kinds of "trickery" to keep that man in power. To add insult to injury, Chatichai reinstated an officer who had been the mastermind of the two previous failed coup attempts and who was a long-time foe of the incumbent military leadership. But indignity alone would not have led the military to take action against Chatichai, had the armed forces not been under a single group of generals who had graduated from the same class. Miscalculation by Chatichai early in his premiership led to the appointment of the so-called "Class-Five Generals" to all the top posts. The armed forces, never under a solid, well-coordinated command since the death of Marshal Sarit in 1963, were once again put under an exceptionally unified, and politically ambitious, leadership.

On its way to the head-on collision with the government, the military was shrewd enough to capitalize on the resentment of other groups over government misconduct. First to come was the creation of a tacit alliance with the civil servants. By the end of 1990 there were numerous press reports on unprofessionalism and nepotism in government handling of bureaucratic promotion and reshuffles. Particularly, provincial governors and police officers who failed to show strong loyalty to the regime were reportedly demoted. Civil servants became emotionally charged, taking these demotions as ill-intentioned interferences in administration by unprincipled politicians.
Uthai Asvavilai, a police general in charge of political intelligence affairs, on being transferred "unfairly" to an obscure position, remarked defiantly:

Must our career officials always slavishly live under the wings of the politicians? Let us be self-reliant. We belong to a prestigious institution (bureaucracy). Why do we have to lean on politicians, especially power-hungry ones?23

Reacting to such a complaint, military-controlled radio stations, the dominant force of the broadcast media, fraternized with those "bullied" officials, claiming civilian officials and military officers were all in the same boat facting unfair political intimidation. Newspaper correspondents were at times shown letters sent by some officers to the army asking their commander in-chief to step in and solve the ongoing conflict between the government and career officials. (Ekalak, October 3, 1990, p. 17). Months later, even the top man at the national police force, General Sawaeng Teerasawat, was abruptly transferred out of power. While several observers regarded this transfer as legitimate, the top brass defiantly showed their moral support for the demoted general by holding a consolation party for him.

More relevant to our point were the military responses to the battle cries of the middle class over the issue of corruption. Military-controlled radio stations took up the anti-corruption banner with enthusiasm, blaming not only the personalities, but also the

23 Ekalak, October 2, 1990, p. 3.
governance, of the democratic system in use, as the root cause of the problem. Often military-approved radio comments called for a cabinet reshuffle or the dismissal of those widely seen as "crooks", or the "mafia", or the incompetents from the cabinet. As with the woes of career officials, the public relations officers of the Army headquarters displayed thousands of letters coming in urging the armed forces to step in and settle the problem of financial impropriety and irregularities among government leaders. (Sayam Rath Weekly, the 19th issue of the 37th year in operation, pp. 10-11).

The climax came in October 1990 when the Assistant Army Chief-of-Staff, General Yuttana Kamdee, issued a veiled threat of a coup saying:

Soldiers will always side with the people. If they are in deep trouble; (of) if the nation is not at peace or in order; then, we will definitely not sit back and relax.24

Undoubtedly, from then on the matter was reduced to a test of the will between the civilian government and the military. Rumors, spreading like wildfire, had it that the government was about to dismiss the insubordinate generals, or, conversely, that the generals were plotting a coup. The burning questions were: when would the action be taken? and who would strike first? On February 23, 1991, the questions were answered at the Don Muang military airport when air force comman-

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24 Ekalak, October 12, 1990, p. 15.
dos stormed the plane of the prime minister and the coup was successfully launched.

All of this said, the root cause of the February coup did not lie simply in the civil-military conflict. More importantly, it had a social basis in the middle class wavering position on democracy. They were supportive of democracy in theory, but very unhappy with the system really at work. The system, as they perceived it, was democracy only in name; in essence it was but a system governed by corrupted and incompetent demagogues. A mandate from the people, sacred in principle they admitted, was nothing given that vote-buying was rampant and that the electorate was in the main ignorant and irresponsible. A good government (to them) was not only popularly elected but also clean and capable. A few of them perhaps went as far as to believe that to be clean and to be capable was even more important than to be elected, or else their spokesmen or intellectuals would not have came to the conclusion that a corrupted democracy was as bad as, if not worse than, military authoritarianism. But on the whole, to be fair, the middle class did not think that authoritarianism was superior to democracy. The point is that the middle class did not appear to believe that democracy could take care of its own faults and flaws if allowed enough time.

On the other hand, the middle class rejected authoritarianism only in principle, while in practice holding that there could be a good authoritarian rule. To them the search for a good governance was not limited to changing the system; they impatiently called for changing of the system. Although they did not openly knock on the door of the barracks, the way in which they slammed democracy and the politicians
paved the way for the return of the military. When the coup was announced most of them accepted it as a fait accompli, hoping that it was just a government, and not a democratic system, that they had just been done away with. To realize their hope, the coup makers had to be altruistic--coming in with good intentions, staying in power a very short time, and making a full effort to return the country to a capable and clean democratic government as soon as was possible.

THE MIDDLE CLASS AND THE RETURN OF DEMOCRACY

Not only had the rebellious generals accurately gauged the disillusion among the middle class before they reached a coup strike decision, they had also seemd to have fully understood their post-coup psychology and expectations. The junta admitted that the coup had pushed Thailand "a step backward" in terms of democratic aspirations, but went on to defend it as indispensable in order that democracy be streamlined and purified. Although the constitution was abrogated, press censorship was not imposed, parties were not banned, and martial law was in effect for only a few months. A special commission, invested with extra-ordinary authority, was formed to investigate alleged corruption among prominent politicians, with powers to freeze and seize assets. The junta declared that a new constitution was to be drawn up with a view to curbing vote-buying and government corruption. As soon as the new charter went into effect, the junta promised, a general election would be called and the country would be put on its democratic track once again. No less satisfying to the
middle class was the junta's decision not to lead an interim government pending the completion of a new constitution. Instead, the interim government was led by a diplomat-turned-businessmen—Anand Panyarachun—who was known for his ability and integrity.

All these post-coup decisions of the military leaders were well accepted by the middle class. Very shortly the coup, which had at first been accepted as a fait accompli became, to use the words of the Far Eastern Economic Review, a "popular putsch." Leading academics, for example, accepted the junta's invitation to join the drafting of the new constitution. Premier Anand's cabinet, composed largely of non-partisan technocrats and executives, was hailed by the middle class and the business world as the best this country had ever produced. A foreign journalist, reflecting on the attitudes of the finance and business communities in Thailand, dubbed the February 23, 1991 takeover: "coup de technocrats" and the junta-installed cabinet: "a World Bank's dream list."

Popular as the coup might have been, a large part of civil society, the middle class in particular, were worried that the military supremacy was running against the world's democratic current, and that in the long run the takeover would tarnish the international image of the country. To most educated Thais, then, military guardianship was at its best a short-term solution to democratic difficulties, but it could never replace democracy. They thus had high hopes that the

February 1991 takeover was a "new-style coup," and were prepared to accept the military leadership "so long as it kept its promise to handover to civilians as soon as was possible."\(^{27}\)

While the majority of the middle class originally regarded the coup in a good light, a minority of them--mostly belonging to the academic-student-NGO activist circles or the ranks of liberal politicians--did not harbor any hope that authoritarians no mattes now well-intended they might be could cure democratic ills. These people were staunchly, yet cautiously, anti-coup from the beginning. Immediately after the coup was announced, ninety-nine prominent academics issued a polite statement calling for a return to democracy as soon as possible. A few days later, a small group of student activists at RamKamhaeng University assembled to openly register their disapproval of the junta in defiance of martial law. A public seminar with an anti-military overtone was later organized at Thammasat University and attended by hundreds of politically conscious people. However, these pro-democracy groups were small in number and rather weak in influence, until they were joined by those sections of the middle class who had not displayed their disapproval of the military at the outset.

The turning point catapulting the main stream of the middle class into action was reached when successive events convinced them that this take over was not "a new-style coup" at all. In less than half a year it became obvious that the military was trying

to cling to power through a constitution which would allow the top brass to hold political positions in the post-election regime without having to resign from the armed forces. The junta was also rebuked for setting up a front party, Samakki Tham, to contend the upcoming election. The party, to the dismay of the middle class, largely comprised corruption-tainted politicians, including those originally charged by the junta-appointed graft-investigation commission. Graft-probing was now denied by the middle class as a sincere effort by the military to curb corruption, as corruption-tainted politicians who had been released by the commission either went on to join the front party or to invite trusted aides of the junta to lead existing parties. In other words, graft-investigation came to be viewed as a ploy by the generals to coerce the patronage-ridden parties and corruption-prone politicians to join the junta in preparing for the coming election.

Added to their disappointment over the sincerity of the coup-makers was the unhappiness of the middle class with the slowdown of the economy, which they regarded as a major consequence of the February putsch. By the end of 1991 the double-digit super-boom was slowed down to a 7-8 percent annual growth. To be fair, this slow down was probably caused much more by the Gulf Crisis and the fact that the growth of world growth was at its nine-year low in 1991. Yet, the educated public held the military responsible for this economic downturn, believing that the coup had inevitably led to a serious decline in international trade, investment, and tourism on one hand, and mounting hardship in international trade negotiations on the other. The middle class and the business community understood that, amidst the world-wide
democratization trend, any military takeover was bound to be ostracized by Western democracies. This was in turn considered very damaging to the domestic scene, given that over the last 5-10 years the Thai economy had been very much internationalized. In 1991 the country became the 25th largest exporter in the world. Between 1980-1991 the annual export growth of Thailand was on average 13.2 percent, exceeding even that of South Korea (12.8 per cent), Taiwan (12.1 per cent), Singapore (8.6 per cent), and Hong Kong (6.2 per cent). At the same time, foreign direct investment had soared nearly eight times between 1986 and 1988; portfolio investment, on the other hand, rose 16 time between 1986 and 1989.

The first "salvo" from the middle class was made in late 1991 when they showed up in scores of thousands to join the student-academic-NGO activists and several parties demonstrating against what they considered undemocratic elements of the charter about to be promulgated. At its peak, the rally was attended by as many as 100,000 men and women. In a marked departure from any previous massive demonstration, this anti-charter demonstration was led and staffed in the main by non-students. The core of the demonstrators were, instead, the economically employed middle class, especially salaried executives or administrators of the business world. These people were lovingly christened by the vernacular press as a "mobile-phone-carrying mob" or a "sedan-driving mob." To stem the

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rising tide of popular resentment, General Suchinda Kraprayoon, the top man of the junta, agreed to revise the charter more or less in line with what the public demanded, and solemnly vowed that he would not assume the premiership after the end of the interregnum period. The demonstration thus died down in early December and the nation was headed for the general election in March 1992.

In retrospect the demonstration against the charter was but a rehearsal by both sides for a decisive battle yet to come. A few months later the final showdown of force between the middle-class-led opposition forces and the military was staged. In April 1992 Suchinda did not keep his promise, taking the premiership. By early May the government was rocked with successive waves of massive demonstrations. As previously, the middle class dominated the ranks of the demonstrators which at times numbered as many as 500,000. According to a survey conducted by the Social Science Association of Thailand, 13.7 per cent of those in the demonstration were self-employed, while 45.7 per cent of them were employees in the private sector. Thus, the majority, that is almost 60 per cent of the demonstrators, were from the private sector. By contrast, students represented only 8.4 per cent of the demonstrators, while government officials accounted for 14.8 per cent of all. Nearly half (45.5 per cent) of the demonstrators earned a lower middle-class or middle-class income, that is in the range of 10,000-49,000 baht a month. It should be noted too that those 30-39 years old accounted for more than one-third (36.5 per cent) of the demonstrators. Together with those 20-29
years old, they represented more than three-fourths (76 per cent) of the demonstrators.³⁰

Who were these young business-centered middle class at the heart of the pro-democracy storm? They were indeed part of the newly emerging middle class, the product of the quickening pace of economic growth over the past decade. By 1987, as estimated by Chai-anan Samudavanija, the number of the middle class in Bangkok was 1.8 million, representing 31 per cent of the city population. Among these 1.8 million people were the 1.2 million of 25-35 year olds who were college (or beyond-college) educated and highly Westernized in life-style.³¹ In other words, these young men and women entered the realm of the middle class in the mid-or late-1980s accounting for two-thirds of the entire Bangkok middle class population. Most of them worked as salaried executives or professionals in the booming private sector, especially in the real estate and security exchange businesses. They had small families of not more than two children in which both parents worked, lived in small apartments, and tried hard to have a car, a credit card and a house of their own. They were called by the mass media as "Thai yuppies," or "Thuppies" for short.³² Before the February coup these "Thuppies" were not politically active, although some of them had been student activists

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³⁰ All Social Science Association figures in this paragraph were cited in Wirat Saengtongkam, "Chomna Mai" Poo Chat Karn Rai Wan May 27, 1992.
during the 1973-1976 period. On the whole, the "Thuppies" were an interesting subject only for research on consumer behavior. Social and political analysis, on the other hand, did not forecast their rapid political rise. Rudiger Korff, for example, held that:

Until now they have been able to prosper through economic growth. Whether they might become politically active if this were to slow down in an open question.\(^{33}\)

Likewise, responding to a challenging notion that Thailand in the mid-1980s was evolving into a "bourgeois polity," Chai-anan was of the view that:

It is too early to conclude that the 'bureaucratic polity' has already evolved into a 'bourgeois polity.' One obstacle to this development is the reluctance of these emerging middle class elements to be politically independent.\(^{34}\)

By late 1991 the "Thuppies" were in the gloomy mood that their recently-acquired wealth was about to melt into the air in the face of the junta's refusal to return to the barracks. Thus, they joined the anti-military ranks with a view to forcing the junta to handover power to civilians as soon as possible, so that their economic life would return to normalcy.

\(^{33}\) Korff, \textit{Bangkok and Modernity}, p. 43.

\(^{34}\) Chai-anan, "Democracy in Thailand," p. 47.
Saying that the middle class played the part of a great opposition force does not mean that the workers or the urban poor contributed insignificantly to the termination of the Suchinda regime. They had been part of the opposition from the outset and their refusal to bow to the firing power of the troops, while a large portion of the middle class demonstrators fled the scene, really kept the movement alive. Their fearless and ceaseless regrouping, in particular, bought the much needed time for the monarchy to step in to stop the brutal crackdown. Nevertheless, without a massive participation by the middle class, the opposition movement might not have been formed at all in the beginning and the support the movement from the upper classes and the world community might have been much weaker. Moreover, far from staying idle or simply taking shelter in a safe place during the repression hours, a good many business-oriented professionals and executives were engaged in a propaganda war against the government-controlled media, employing faxes, telephones, or circulation letters to transmit alternative information to the public. Some were even more innovative, jamming the police or military communications at the fateful moments with their high-frequency walkie-talkies, and thus preventing the government from taking effective action against the demonstrators.

If the business-centered middle class was at the center of the stage during the peaceful demonstration period, and the lower middle class, along with the lower classes, displayed exceptional courage and self-sacrifice in the bloody hours, then the non-business middle class was pivotal in bringing about the collapse of the Suchinda government. No sooner
had the shooting stopped, than did several groups of doctors, nurses, teachers, lawyers, and even government officials in Bangkok and the provinces call for the resignation of Suchinda or the dissolution of parliament to make room for a more legitimate government. Together with the mass media, these groups cited the heavy damage inflicted upon the national economy and upon the international reputation of the country or the revered monarchy by the violent repression as reasons for Suchinda to step down. After the downfall of Suchinda, they tried hard to block those parties formerly associated with Suchinda from forming an alternative government. Their pressure, assisted by secret high-level manipulation, eventually bore fruit. On June 10, 1992, the House Speaker decided to nominate the non-partisan Anand Panyarachun as prime minister one more time. Thus, the curtain of the drama which had the February 23 coup as its first act was lowered down.

THE MIDDLE CLASS AND THE PROSPECT OF DEMOCRACY

Undoubtedly the middle class have emerged as a vibrant force opposed to military-led authoritarianism or guided democracy. Yet, opposing military rule and fostering democracy may be two different missions. The middle class have yet to prove that they are a force capable of fulfilling both missions. The middle class have solemnly vowed--via their revolt in May--that they no longer accept a military-led regime, despite its democratic trappings. Although the Suchinda regime was by no means less democratic than the semi-democratic regime of Premier Prem, the middle
class who took to the streets did not want the political clock to turn back that far. Yet, it is premature to say that they have reached a point of rejecting "the men on horseback" as interventionists occasionally needed for the treatment of democratic malaise. In other words, it cannot be ruled out that the middle class will not form a coup alliance—explicit, or more likely, tacit—with the military, should there emerge widespread resentment over the performance and the integrity of a democratic government. To be permissive of coup-making, however, is close to playing with fire, for one never knows if the officers who order the tanks to roll on the streets are sincerely doing the country a service, if they are widely acceptable, or if they will leave as soon as their mission has ended. Particularly, should they try to stay in power for good, as Suchinda and his men did, a deadly confrontation may take place between the pro-democracy forces and the junta. In that case, no matter whoever comes out on top, bloodshed is the inevitable outcome, and the march of democracy may be pushed back even further.

To be a force for democratic consolidation, in addition to a force against military domination, the middle class must part company with prospective coup-makers for good. That is tantamount to having them abandon the long-held idea of using a coup attempt as a means to counter democratic excesses or imperfections. Connected to that, they need a new political outlook which entails a more patient and practical approach to democratization. Politicians, political parties, and rural voters, whose behavior has recently viewed by the educated urbanites as hindering a "proper working" of democracy, must be seen in a better light—a light which is much more sociological than moralistic.
At the heart of the matter we must abandon the notion that, for democracy to flourish, only 'ignorant' rural voters must be educated. On the contrary, I believe, the middle class, their mentors and spokesmen in particular, need reschooling as well. It is common wisdom among the educated to see democracy being caught up in a vicious cycle which is propelled largely by the vices of the ambitious, dictatorial-minded, military leaders on the one hand, and the greedy, irresponsible, business-based politicians on the other. Politicians were seen as engaging in the game of electoral money-dumping to recoup later once they had power in their hands. The rural electorate, on the contrary, was regarded as a shaky, unreliable bedrock of democracy. To the middle class, the rural-dwellers, who make up the large majority of the electorate, easily all victim to greedy politicians because of their poverty and ignorance. The behavior of the politicians and the voters in Thailand deviating so much from the modern Western notion of democracy, the middle class hold popular mandate in low esteem. Needless to say, they tend to see the hallmark of a good government to be its competence and integrity, not the mandate if receives from the people. Many of them hold government competence and integrity to be incompatible with popular mandate. In other words, government impropriety and incompetence, in their view, are unavoidable, having originated mainly from an unqualified popular mandate. Intellectually armed with such an outlook, the middle class have more or less condoned, if not warmly embraced, coup-staging as a way out of a democratic stalemate.

For the middle class, politicians are not alone in tampering with democracy; ambitious officers are
equally held to be guilty of undermining democratic consolidation. The military is depicted by the academia and the press as jealously guarding its power and privileges against the encroachment of politicians, parties, and democratic elements. The middle class, to be sure, believe that most coup attempts have been made out of the narrow interest of the armed forces or their officers. The point is that they are cynical enough to take coup-makers as no more evil than corrupted politicians, if not a lesser of the two evils. For the middle class, just as there are good and bad politicians, there could be good and bad coup-makers. Put a bit differently, the legitimacy of a political regime lies more in its performance (efficiency and integrity) than its origin (popular mandate or use of force).

It is high time for the middle class to see themselves not only as critics of the two political "evils." They must realize that, they, too, are part of the problem! Above all, the middle class should see what they call the "perverted behavior" of the politicians and the voters as deeply rooted in the sociological life of the rural areas. To succeed, candidates cannot simply throw money at everyone they meet in villages. On the contrary, they need to understand that rural voters cast their ballots along a patron-client line, not party platform or ideology. Long before the advent of a money economy and electoral competition, peasants and farmers--deprived of socio-economic security--entered into a patron-client network with local influentials such as village headmen, shopkeepers, school teachers, and abbots. Through this personal, face-to-face network a multi-faceted relationship between the two parties was formed. Presently, exchange of benefits between local influentials--
acting as patron, and peasants or farmers--acting as client, is still common. Monetized economy and electoral competition simply add another kind of exchange to this network: peasants and farmers give votes in return for money or other benefits provided by influentials. In the eyes of the middle class, it appears that politicians, local influentials, and rural voters conduct an electoral pattern which is, at best, a deviation from an ideal notion of democracy, or, at worst, shameful and immoral. To most rural dwellers and candidates, however, they are acting morally in accordance with the existing social norm.

In brief, I believe that neither poverty and ignorance nor greed and irresponsibility, on the part of rural voters and politicians is responsible for the resentment of the middle class over what they regard as irritating behavior by those involved in a rural election. Rather, the existence of a huge socio-economic gap between the urban and rural sectors has resulted in democracy being viewed from diametrically opposed positions. Democracy sought after by the middle class is premised on a society of independent individuals who are 'rational minded' and conscious of an abstractly conceived political community. To the village poor, however, democracy is a system which allows them a chance to draw political attention to their problems or grievances which are immediately placed, concretely felt, and conceived without the notion of there existing a relationship between their action and the fate of a democracy. Against the current of the middle class thought, I propose that democracy fails not because the poor 'misunderstand' or the rich 'abuse' democracy, but because they themselves have imposed their own version of democracy on the
whole society. When the middle class blast politicians and voters, they think they are being critical for the good of democracy. The fact, however, is that they are uncritical in making such a sociologically poor criticism. The point is that in a country where democratic institutions are weak, the army exceptionally politicized and strong, the military alone stands to gain from careless exposure or criticism of democracy as often conducted by the intelligentsia and the mass media of the middle class.

To be sure, this is not to propose that critical reports or studies of democratic politics are unacceptable or undesirable. However, these should not be carried out to discredit politicians or voters. Sociological understanding of the phenomenon should take priority over moralistic condemnation of the people involved. When analyzing the problems of democracy, the public should be led to proceed from the assumption that politicians, businessmen, and rural voters in Thailand are neither more vicious nor more virtuous than their counterparts in the West or in any other part of the world. Press reports or scholarly studies should recognize democratic improvements as much as its weaknesses. Democratic flaws or weaknesses as previously viewed through the lenses of normative theory of democracy, should be reviewed in a historical and comparative perspective. The public should be made aware that those weaknesses or faults are not unique to Thailand; just as they are happening in many newly established democracies of the present, they also happened in Western democracies of the past. Above all, the middle class intellectuals should repeatedly drive home a point that what are usually listed as democratic pathologies: corruption,
nepotism, and administrative incompetence, did exist too in the authoritarian regime of the past, especially under Field Marshals Sarit, Thanom, and Prapat. Connected to this is the point that, as our history bears witness to, military intervention that seeks to address democratic problems has never produced a better democracy. Virtually all putsches end up with a government which is worse than the regime it replaced. The middle class intellectuals need to express clearly and confidently that the only way to nurture a democracy is to let it take care of its own weaknesses or problems.

These things said, it is a fact of life that even if these lines of thought are agreeable to the middle class, a large part of them will not change their attitude towards democracy soon enough. Certain institutional designs are therefore needed to prevent them from entering any coup alliance with the military. These designs are meant to produce an honest and efficient rule, as defined by the middle class. Specifically, we need to change laws and rules to curb political corruption and vote-buying, while increasing the possibility for capable candidates acceptable to the educated middle class to get elected to the House of Representatives. Finally the middle class should realize that, although these suggestions may be implemented, democratic flaws—diminishing they may be—are here to stay as long as awesome socio-economic disparity between towns and villages continues to exist. If the middle class are true to what they pledge—to establish a democracy ruled by leaders with integrity and competence—they must earnestly lend support to a rural development which will turn patronage-ridden villages into small towns of middle-class farmers
or well-paid workers. During the last two decades several battles have been dramatically fought on the streets of Bangkok for the cause of democracy, but the one, and the only one, that delivers a long-lasting victory for democrats will take place in their rural areas in the form of protracted and perhaps uneventful socio-economic transformation.