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Introduction

Transition, as it is implied here, encompasses the important liberalizing changes of the new political environment which emerged in the aftermath of the student revolution of October 1973. Hence transition means more than the relatively liberal provisions and other changes of the new Thai constitution. Constitutional change is not new to Thailand, but the prevailing civilian awareness and attitude toward socialism, as well as the increasing demands by well-organized groups of students, teachers, workers, and farmers, do represent a significant departure from all previous attempts to achieve democracy in Thailand. Successful strikes by workers in Bangkok and grass-roots movements in the provinces have characterized the new emerging forces in Thai politics since the October student revolt of 1973. These political events occurred at a rate never before experienced by the Thais. Moreover, unlike previous protests, these movements gained broad-based support from diverse sectors of Thai society. Thailand's experiment with democracy after 1973 became not only the promotion of democratic institutions but a new determination on the part of previously neglected and suppressed sectors of Thai society to achieve permanent enfranchisement. Transition, in the context of political developments since 1973, is related to three main areas of concern: bureaucratic reform, emerging social forces, and changes in domestic and foreign policy.

CHANGE ON SEVERAL FRONTS

After the 1973 student-led overthrow of the Thanom military regime, Thailand's domestic policies became more involved with socialistic

programs representing a new policy approach. Related to this new approach in domestic affairs was the bureaucratic reform which had taken place at various levels of the Thai bureaucracy.

The traditional Thai bureaucracy has persisted in a conventional mold with few exceptions since Prince Damrong instituted the reforms of King Chulalongkorn the Great. This bureaucracy has been described by many scholars of Thai politics (among them F. W. Riggs, W. F. Vella, J. L. Sutton, and W. Siffen) as being one of the most adaptable and, at the same time, the most durable systems of civil service in Southeast Asia. Formed on Confucian principles of civil service and hierarchy of authority that owed its origins and legitimacy to the monarchy, this system has continued almost unchanged since the 1932 coup which legally shifted the bureaucracy from the monarchy to civilian and military control. In the aftermath of the bloodless coup of 1932, power shifted to a slightly broader based decision-making apparatus, but rule by various dominant cliques at the highest level of this new power base still persisted.

In comparison, reforms after October 1973 differed from previous reforms in that the new changes were instigated from below and addressed the process of selection in various sectors of the Thai bureaucracy. Several stabilized positions in the bureaucratic hierarchy of some of the ministries, which were normally based on upward advancement via seniority, became increasingly rotative due to reform-minded Thai intellectuals and the liberal atmosphere in the aftermath of the October revolt. In some cases, a new democratic elective process replaced the traditional appointments. These innovations were tried, began to be accepted at various levels of the government bureaucracy, and became particularly evident in the educational institutions. Although the universities witnessed the most change, the process was attempted by many other institutions including the Ministry of Interior, various council positions, and even upper-level positions of investigative teams involved in cases of government corruption. A variety of techniques were employed to make recruitment and membership in these organizations and government bodies more representative.

Another significant aspect of the transition was the emergence of new social forces. The pressure brought to bear on the provincial administrations in the urban centers outside the capital city of Bangkok became increasingly intense, although organized protests by the proliferation of oppositional groups which emerged after the October 1973 revolt were most intense in Bangkok. The techniques of the new social forces in pressing demands on the various ministries and agencies of the government became as diversified as the demands themselves. In one case a

schoolteacher, speaking to a rally of striking teachers in front of the Ministry of Education, cut his wrist to emphasize his determination to remain until the government capitulated to the teachers' demands.

The largest and most visible oppositional force immediately after the 1973 October revolution was the students of the National Student Center of Thailand (NSCT). Other student organizations, such as the Federation of Independent Students of Thailand (FIST), which were break-away groups from the NSCT, also became prominent in pressing various demands for reform on the new civilian government. In the eight to ten months after the October uprising, however, many other groups assumed an influential role. Fishermen's organizations began to mobilize national support more effectively and press their demands for fishing rights and wage and price guarantees, while farmers' associations conducted marches and also began to organize and play an effective role in trying to achieve land reform and price controls in rice production and distribution. Moreover, other concerned citizens' groups organized strikes and used various techniques to press their demands on the government. At the same time, workers and others became more effective in exerting pressure on the government. Many of their demands were for labor reform and other domestic policies calling for greater control over foreign investments and more equitable distribution of goods and services.

Another characteristic of the transition involved changes in Thailand's foreign policy. This aspect of the transition has most to do with Thailand's ultimate survival in the strategy for peace in Southeast Asia. Accordingly, Thai foreign policy began to shift toward neutralism and nonalignment in its mildest form and toward anti-neocolonialism in its harshest form. The change in Thai foreign policy was also characterized by a general trend toward normalization of relations with the People's Republic of China and accommodation with the new communist governments of Vietnam, Laos, and Kampuchea. Another significant aspect of the foreign policy change was the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Thailand and the general proposals of Thailand's first coalition government. Kukrit Pramoj, who led the coalition government in 1973, devised a policy to phase out most American-backed programs for counterinsurgency and defense support. The overall proposal was designed so that no country in the future would use Thailand as a base for aggression on other countries in Asia. These new policy proposals pertained particularly to the U.S. air force bases which had carried out bombing missions over Laos, Kampuchea, and North Vietnam. This general policy shift included the prohibition of U.S. reconnaissance flights from Thailand over the Indian Ocean. These new far-reaching policies, domestic

and international in scope, began to form a pattern of policy objectives which fostered a political climate favorable to the broadening of the base of democracy in Thailand.

The new political climate also helped to foster specific programs designed to maintain democratic institutions. One such program was the Teaching Democracy Program which sent five thousand students to villages in order to work with the people. This program included a public relations component which was aired daily at prime time on national television. It also included a series of colorful posters designed to prepare the *phuu noi* (common people) for democracy. Various posters depicting the necessity of equal treatment for all classes of people generally sought to promote the right of all Thai citizens to participate in the politics and future of their own country. Moreover, the public relations aspect of this program was designed to break down the psychological barriers which had helped keep the rural Thais submissive to authoritarian rule by previous military regimes.

Another element of the transition, though one not likely to play a dominant role in the near future, was the philosophical movement which grew extensively on the left of the Thai political spectrum. Thai leftist intellectuals, representing Marxist and Russian progressivist philosophies, promoted socialistic adaptations to the Thai situation. Moreover, a Maoist movement caught hold among university students who wanted to propagate radical changes in the provinces. Representatives of the Russian philosophical movement proposed programs which would gradually increase the pressure for change on traditional Thai institutions; the Maoist-oriented movement was more interested in inculcating new values in the common people to replace those deemed most resistant to the proposed radical reforms of the Thai political system.

The political environment, particularly after 1973, also created a unity of purpose among many oppositional groups. Students and leftist groups jointly supported the protests against police incursions involving mistreatment of members of separatist movements in southern Thailand. Leaders of regional guerrilla movements in the north and northeast had begun to collaborate in an attempt to create a unified front of insurgency. Moreover, the general publication and leadership of "new left" and traditional communist literature increased a hundredfold during this period. At the universities, Thai intellectuals, instructors, and students began organizing panels, seminars, and study groups to debate various political issues including the relative merits of the Marxist, Maoist, and Russian progressivist approaches to political and economic development.

DEMOCRACY IN TRANSITION

It should be made clear, however, that it was not communist-supported movements for a “people’s democracy” or a “new democracy” that characterized political change in Thailand either during the liberal period from 1973 to 1976 or during the right-wing regime of Thanin from 1976 to 1979. Neither is the term “democracy” when used in the context of transition meant to imply only a reemergence of elections and parliamentary government.

Democracy in this context goes beyond the growth of democratic and parliamentary forms and addresses itself liberally to a “broadening of the base”—the enfranchisement of new groups. It is the expansion of popular participation in a largely autocratic decision-making structure. While such a process may admittedly occur within an authoritarian or totalitarian system, what makes Thailand’s democracy unique is that the Thais have chosen to broaden their political base through the mechanism of parliamentarianism. By retaining accepted Thai values whenever possible—despite their denunciation by some elements—in conjunction with Western vehicles for popular representation, the Thais have blended Eastern methods with Western forms.

Hence students could overthrow an unpopular regime and call for a government of the masses, all the while prominently displaying portraits of the monarchy’s incumbents, the king and queen. Volunteers could take to the countryside in an attempt to foster a Maoist cultural revolution of sorts, but parliamentary democracy was the intended beneficiary. And workers could use Soviet methods designed to achieve power for the workers—not in order to seize the means of production but rather for the capitalist end of higher wages.

After 1973 a new system emerged with the embryo of a new popular consensus buttressing the legitimacy of parliamentary forms. Between October 1973 and October 1976 hundreds of incidents occurred throughout the kingdom, any one of which would in the era of military domination have served as justification for a coup. Emergent opposition forces forestalled such a happening, and it is with the roots and growth of this kind of democracy and participation that this book is concerned.

THE OPPOSITION

In Thailand oppositional forces are viewed as groups of people mobilized to oppose or change the Thai government as represented by the monarch, the bureaucratic elite, and the military. Opposition can take the form of parliamentary opposition, which has been legitimized for brief periods between military coups, or it may take a more violent form such as that of the Communist Party of Thailand. Between these two

extremes various groups have emerged to oppose the Thai government on specific issues and for particular periods of time. It is not my intention to identify and explain the nature of all these groups; instead I shall focus on two of the broad-based "progressive forces" which gained significant momentum during and after the student revolution of 1973: workers and students.

Other significant oppositional groups, such as the separatist movement of the Malay Thais in the south and the Meo tribes in the north, have been reasonably successful in sustaining their movements for relatively long periods of time. These oppositional groups are regional and ethnic in origin and nature, however, and are seen as oppositional forces only within the broad context of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT).

This book deals only with those Thai oppositional forces represented by the CPT, workers, students, and Parliament. In the following pages I shall explain the origin, nature, and influence of each in Thai politics.