

Polity IV Country Report 2010: Thailand

<table style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 15%;">Score:</td> <td style="width: 15%;">2009</td> <td style="width: 15%;">2010</td> <td style="width: 15%;">Change</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Polity:</td> <td>4</td> <td>4</td> <td>0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Democ:</td> <td>5</td> <td>5</td> <td>0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Autoc:</td> <td>1</td> <td>1</td> <td>0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Durable:</td> <td></td> <td>2</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Tentative:</td> <td></td> <td>Yes</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	Score:	2009	2010	Change	Polity:	4	4	0	Democ:	5	5	0	Autoc:	1	1	0	Durable:		2		Tentative:		Yes		
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SCODE	THI	CCODE	800	Date of Report	15 August 2011																				
Polity IV Component Variables																									
XRREG	XRCOMP	XROPEN	XCONST	PARREG	PARCOMP																				
2	2	4	5	3	3																				
Date of Most Recent Polity Transition (3 or more point change)																									
End Date	4 June 2007		Begin Date	23 January 2008																					
Polity Fragmentation: No																									
Constitution	2007																								
Executive(s)	Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra (Pheu Thai); elected by the House of Representatives, 5 August 2011																								
Legislature	Bicameral: House of Representatives (500 seats; 375 directly elected, 125 proportionally elected; most recent elections, 3 July 2011) Pheu Thai: 265 Democrat Party (DP): 159 Bhumjaithai: 34 Chartthaipattana: 19 Other parties: 23 Senate (150 seats; 76 non-partisan members directly elected, one from each province, 74 appointed by judges and independent government bodies; most recent elections, 2 March 2008)																								
Judiciary	Supreme Court, Constitutional Court																								

Narrative Description:¹

Executive Recruitment: Transitional or Restricted Election (7)

The political history of modern Thailand has been dominated by the influence of the military and popular support for the monarch, King Bhumibol, whose support has frequently determined the fate of regimes in the country. Civilian rule returned to Thailand in 1992 after violent protests forced the military to return to the barracks. Unlike previous attempts at civilian rule, the 1992-2006 period saw the military generally

¹ The research described in this report was sponsored by the Political Instability Task Force (PITF). The PITF is funded by the Central Intelligence Agency. The views expressed herein are the authors' alone and do not represent the views of the US Government.

accepting its position outside of the political limelight, even after the 1997 economic crisis and subsequent political instability. While the military still had significant influence in the political arena during this period, nevertheless, primary decision making authority rested in the hands of elected civilians.

National elections between 1992 and the coup in 2006 were generally considered procedurally free and fair by international observers. However, the influence of money continued to undermine the consolidation of democracy in this country. The corruption and nepotism of “old-style” politicians, which triggered military intervention in the past, remained a problem. However, Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai (1997-2000), widely known as “Mr. Clean,” actively sought to limit the role of patronage politics in Thailand. This effort was institutionalized with the strengthening of the National Electoral Commission (NEC) and the Senate (which served as an oversight body for limiting corruption in the House of Representatives). The NEC flexed its institutional power in 2000 when it disqualified many candidates for the Senate on grounds of corruption and fraud and in 2001 when allegations of vote-buying and electoral irregularities caused the election commission to run fresh elections in over sixty constituencies. However, money and corruption continued to infect the upper echelons of Thai politics.

Thaksin Shinawatra founded the Thai Rak Thai (TRT, "Thais Love Thais") party in 1998 along with Somkid Jatusripitak, PDP ally Sudarat Keyuraphan, Purachai Piumsombun, and 19 others. With a populist platform, Thai Rak Thai promised universal access to healthcare, a debt moratorium for farmers, and development funds for all Thai villages. After Prime Minister Chuan dissolved parliament in November 2000, Thaksin's party won a sweeping victory in the January 2001 elections, the first election held under the Constitution of 1997. Thai Rak Thai won 248 parliamentary seats and needed only 3 more seats to form a government. Thaksin opted for a broader coalition with the Chart Thai Party (41 seats) and New Aspiration Party (36 seats), while absorbing the smaller Seritham Party (14 seats), in order to strengthen his control of the political agenda and protect his government from a no-confidence vote. Thaksin and the Thai Rak Thai won a landslide victory in the February 2005 elections, taking 374 of 500 seats in the legislature. However, while his rural support remained strong, his popularity in the urban centers quickly waned following a series of financial scandals and protests against his rule became commonplace in late 2005 and early 2006. Facing calls for impeachment, Thaksin dissolved Parliament on 24 February 2006 and called snap elections for 4 April 2006, which were boycotted by the opposition. As a result, Thaksin's party won nearly all seats in parliament, however, the results were invalidated by the Constitutional Court on May 6 and new elections were ordered for October 2006. On September 19, Thaksin was ousted by General Boonyaratglin and the military, supported by the King.

A military government led by the Council for National Security (CNS) was established. The CNS subsequently installed Surayut Chulanon as interim prime minister, and promised new elections for no later than December 2007. The CNS oversaw the drafting of a new, permanent constitution that was drafted by a 35-member committee, approved by the interim National Legislative Assembly (NLA), and submitted to a popular referendum on 19 August 2007; it passed with only a slim margin (56.7%). New general elections under the 2007 constitution were held on 23 December 2007 with the People's Power Party (PPP, the successor to the banned TRT) emerging as the largest party.

The CNS voluntarily disbanded itself on 22 January 2008. The leader of the PPP, Samak Sundaravej, who had openly campaigned as a proxy for the banned Thaksin, was elected prime minister on 28 January 2008 and the new coalition government was sworn in on February 6. Legal challenges and mass demonstrations by the opposition effectively paralyzed Samak's government and, on September 2, he declared a state of emergency. Samak's leadership was ultimately undone by the Constitutional Court, which ruled to disqualify him for violations of election laws on September 2008. Sundaravej was replaced as prime minister by the new PPP leader, Somchai Wongsawat (Thaksin's brother-in-law) on September 17. Protests continued to escalate until the Constitutional Court ruled to dissolve the PPP on 2 December 2008 and bar its leadership, including Somchai, from politics for five years. Mass demonstrations dissipated following the dissolution order and a young technocrat from the Democrat Party (DP), Abhisit Vejjajiva, was named prime minister on 17 December 2008. Members of the PPP formed yet another new party following its dissolution, this one named Pheu Thai. On 18 February 2011, a spokesman for Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva announced that new parliamentary elections would be held in June 2011. On 16 May 2011 Thaksin Shinawatra's sister, Lingluck Shinawatra, was named by the Pheu Thai party as their top candidate on their party list for the elections. In parliamentary elections held 3 July 2011, the Pheu Thai party won a majority of seats and elected political newcomer Lingluck Shinawatra as prime minister; she took office on 5 August 2011.

Executive Constraints: Substantial Limitations (5)

Between 1992 and 2006 Thailand was a parliamentary democracy in which the premier was directly accountable to the legislative branch. The judiciary was largely independent from executive branch interference, but during the impeachment process of Prime Minister Thaksin during the first half of 2001, the Constitutional Court faced considerable political pressure and allegations of judiciary corruption were widespread. Since the September 2006 military coup, the parliament has been dissolved and the judiciary has ruled consistently in support of the Interim Government's policies. On 30 May 2007, the Constitutional Tribunal dissolved Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai party and banned its top leaders from politics for five years. Executive constraints result mainly from the facts that no single leader commands the loyalty of the military and the King continues to exert enormous influence over general policy.

Political Participation: Factional/Restricted Competition (6)

Political parties in Thailand are largely based on flexible patronage networks. Parties do not generally offer platforms or represent particular ideologies and electoral campaigns continue to be influenced by vote-buying and party violence. Despite these problems, Thailand made significant strides between 1992-2006 to limit the role of "old style politics" and institutionalize democratic political procedures. Several events, however, beginning with the impeachment process of Prime Minister Thaksin during 2001, have shown just how fragile these democratic procedures and practices were in Thailand. In 2001 open warnings of violent street protests if the prime minister were to be evicted from office were routinely heard, and Prime Minister Thaksin Thaksin endured significant domestic and international criticism for curbing Thailand's media.

Although the 2001 impeachment crisis was handled fairly peacefully, throughout 2004 Thai authorities implemented tough measures in an effort to crack down on an outbreak of violence in the south of the country. Initially arguing that this violence was largely the work of "criminal elements," the government of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra tried to quash speculation that the Islamic separatist movement in its Muslim-majority southern provinces was resurfacing. The Muslim population in the south of the country represents almost four percent of the total population of Thailand. Apart from occasional attacks by a small group of extremists, separatist violence in the south of the country had largely been contained since the late 1980s. Despite government claims of national unity and religious harmony, over one hundred security force members, Buddhist monks and civilians were killed in ethnic violence in the first quarter of 2004. Moreover, in May 2004 more than one hundred Muslim youths were killed by security forces after they carried out raids on police and army posts in three southern provinces. Further violent protests in the fall of 2004 also produced the deaths of seventy-eight Muslims while in government detention in the southern Thai province of Narathiwat. By the end of 2008 more than 3000 people had died in separatist violence, with the security forces blamed for many of the deaths. The separatist movement is currently being organized by Muslim activists associated with the Pattani United Liberation Organization (PULO).

In 2006 a growing division between the rural, populist support base of Prime Minister Thaksin and the urban elites became highly factionalized. This polarization followed the 23 January 2006 sale of the Thaksin family's interests in the Shin Corporation for US\$1.6 billion. On 24 February 2006 Thaksin dissolved the National Assembly and called new elections in response to increasing protests demanding his resignation. The opposition quickly announced that they would boycott the elections, and the confrontation continued to escalate following the victory by Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai party in the uncontested April 2 elections, which were subsequently declared invalid by the Constitutional Court. After Thaksin failed to honor his promise to resign his leadership, the Thai military ousted his government on September 19, 2006, while Thaksin was out of the country on an official visit. The Thai Rak Thai party was officially disbanded in May 2007 and arrest warrants for Thaksin and his wife were issued on corruption charges; in addition, 111 leaders of the TRT were banned from political activity for a period of five years. New general elections were held on 23 December 2007 and a new government led by the People Power Party (the successor to the TRT) was formed on 6 February 2008. Moves by the new government to undo political restrictions and constitutional provisions implemented under the military government triggered mass demonstrations in Bangkok and other urban centers led by the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), the same organization that had led the demonstrations against the Thaksin government. While the military promised it would not move against the government, the security forces refused to move against the opposition leaving Thailand's highly polarized politics at a stalemate. Tensions continued to mount through the summer. On August 26, PAD demonstrators converged on the Government House and began an extended

occupation of the offices in an attempt to force the prime minister's resignation; the demonstration expanded to include transportation strikes and a blockade of provincial airports. On November 25, thousands of PAD protesters occupied and effectively shutdown Bangkok's new international airport. Tensions were calmed in December 2008 when the Constitutional Court dissolved the People's Power Party and banned its leadership from politics for five years.

Since the political compromise that led to the establishment of a government led the young technocrat Abhisit Vejjajiva, the political process in Thailand has calmed somewhat; however, the confrontation between the populist "Red Shirts," who still look to the exiled Thaksin as their leader, and the urban "Yellow Shirts" continues to simmer and, occasionally, increases to a boil. Tempering the confrontation is the respect both factions hold for their aging and increasingly frail monarch, King Bhumibol Adulyadej. King Bhumibol has reigned since 1946 and the imminent succession question at once has dampened contention in the short term and promises to redefine the political landscape and the dynamics of contention once he has passes from the scene.

The spring of 2010 saw intense conflict between "Red Shirt" protestors and government forces (and its "Yellow Shirt" supporters) in the capital city, which left 91 people dead and more than 1,400 injured. The protestors, supporters of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatar, were demanding early elections, claiming that because the current coalition government took power via a parliamentary agreement rather than a fresh popular vote, it did not represent the will of the people. While the protests were forcefully put down in May, the state of emergency in Bangkok was not rescinded until December 2010. The following February, Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva announced that new elections would be held in the summer of 2011, six month ahead of schedule.