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What to Read on Thai Politics

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Thailand has historically been one of the more stable polities in Southeast Asia, with a domineering bureaucratic-military state towering over a relatively quiescent peasantry. In the 1970s, economic development spurred democratic challenges to military dominance. But this did not change the generally elitist pattern of Thai politics, as metropolitan and provincial business elites joined with military bureaucrats to share power. In recent years, the tycoon-cum-prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra has launched a populist attack on Thailand's political order, courting the poor in unprecedented ways, awakening the rural masses, and putting the country's traditionally dominant institutions and actors under scrutiny. A coup in 2006 sought to restore the status quo, but it seems instead to have led the country further into uncharted territory.


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Written by two of the most prolific and prominent scholars of Thai politics, this book provides the most accessible, comprehensive, and analytically stimulating introduction to modern Thailand. The authors are especially good at narrating the economic and political changes that have occurred in recent decades, including the expansion of the agrarian frontier and the arrival of Chinese merchants and laborers to urban areas.


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This study examines Thai politics through thematic and historical chapters. It is particularly strong on the turbulent period in the mid-1970s, when Thailand first experienced democratic governance. From 1973 to 1976, numerous political parties emerged and civilian governments sought to pursue social reforms. However, the deep polarization in the country, and more generally throughout mainland Southeast Asia, brought the incipient democracy crashing down in a massacre of student activists at Thammasat University (the Berkeley of Thailand).


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Perhaps the best book on Thailand's history -- and undoubtedly the most original -- *Siam Mapped* argues that Thailand should not be seen as a victim of Western imperialism, as it is often depicted in Thai accounts, but as an
aggressor itself. Challenging the view that the Bangkok-centered state actually had control and legitimate claims over many peripheral areas now naturally considered part of Thailand (including the restive Malay-Muslim southern provinces), Thongchai Winichakul boldly takes on the nationalist strains of Thai historiography. His narration of different methods of mapping the nation in the 19th century also makes for an extremely engaging read.


A former academic-turned-politician, Anek Laothamatas argues that the fragility of Thailand's democracy stems from a rift between the rural and urban sectors. Those in rural Thailand see democracy as a means of gaining immediate benefits from local politicians, while Bangkok's urban middle class believes that democracy should bring forth professional experts with programmatic goals. The numerical dominance of the rural sector often enables it to elect politicians devoted to its interests, thus rankling the urban middle class. This, in turn, pushes the middle class to support military coups as a way of eliminating corrupt politicians. The result is a country deeply split in terms of its perception of democracy, where the rural people have the numbers to impose their vision, but the urban people the capacities and networks to reject and overturn that choice. The current political crisis fits nicely into Laothamatas' framework. When published in its Thai version, this article generated extensive public discussion.


Yoshifumi Tamada, a professor at Kyoto University, has mined a wealth of data on Thai politics and crafted a distinct and insightful argument on the elitist nature of Thai democracy. He argues that the middle class in Thailand is by no means a force for democracy. Furthermore, he claims that the framers of a "people's constitution" in 1997 -- heralded as a major act of political reform -- were driven by elitist concerns that do not strengthen a truly people-oriented democratic regime. The book thus provides a sharp critique of the liberal political reforms undertaken in Thailand.


"Network monarchy" is a term for describing the structure of power through which the king of Thailand asserts his political interests. Contrary to the widely held view in Thailand that the king stands above politics, Duncan McCargo argues that the king is not a neutral actor but in fact often exercises political influence through his proxies, most notably Prem Tinsulanonda, the president of the Privy Council and former army chief and prime minister. McCargo's thesis, conceived initially to explain the struggle between the monarchy and former Prime Minister Thaksin over authority in southern Thailand, provides a compelling frame for understanding the 2006 coup and the tensions that have boiled over afterward. The sharp polarization that continues to fracture the Thai polity is ultimately about the monarchy's attempts to maintain its realm of power against the populist vision that Thaksin wrought.


http://www.foreignaffairs.com/print/65182
This study of Thaksin is the most comprehensive analysis of the populist leader's politics and policies. It serves as a political biography of sorts but with a strong analytical current. A central theme is Thaksin's merging of business with politics, where the state is exploited for business interests and every political problem is framed through the lens of a business mindset. The book follows Thaksin's story until 2004, but it provides the background for understanding how the prime minister envisioned politics and how that very vision of politics in the interest of personal business eventually led to his downfall.

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