Thaksin’s Populism

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ABSTRACT Thaksin Shinawatra was not a populist when he rose to power in 2001, but became so in intensifying stages over the next five years. His populism went beyond redistributive policies to include rhetorical rejection of Thailand’s political elite, and denigration of liberal democracy in favour of personalised authoritarianism. Fears provoked by this populism helped to mobilise the urban middle-class rejection of Thaksin which was background to the 2006 coup. Thaksin’s populism was a response to the demands and insecurities of the large informal mass created by an outward-orientated strategy of development. Thaksin’s populism resembles the neo-populism prevalent in Latin America in the 1980s and 1990s. Also like these regimes, Thaksin made no investment in mass organisation, and fell precipitately when subject to elite attack. In Latin America, this phase has been superseded by leaders with a more ideological message and greater investment in organisation.

KEY WORDS: Thailand, populism, Thaksin Shinawatra, coup, Latin America

Thaksin Shinawatra achieved massive personal popularity, as demonstrated by scenes of public acclaim and high endorsement at the general elections in 2005 and 2006. No previous Thai elected political leader had courted or achieved such popularity. His support was strongest in rural areas of the north, north-east, and central regions, and among rural migrants in the capital. During Thaksin’s time in office, the term “populism” was applied to Thai politics for the first time, and rendered into Thai for the first time, to describe this novel cultivation of popular support and the mechanisms that lay behind it. Fear that populism would enhance the power of the mass in Thai politics at the expense of established elite interests was a major factor in assembling the coalition of forces behind the coup of September 2006. Among the four reasons which the junta gave for staging the coup was that Thaksin had “caused an unprecedented rift in society,” meaning the rift that ran between the Bangkok middle class on one extreme, and Thaksin’s largely rural support base on the other. Some key figures in the middle-class opposition to Thaksin pinpointed his populism as a major reason for rejecting his leadership. In the final lines of a book written on the eve of the 2006 coup, the political scientist Anek Laothamatas (2006: 202) wrote, “We must deal quickly with Thaksin-style populism before another economic crisis arises and destroys the nation completely.”
Shortly after the coup, Sondhi Limthongkul, a media entrepreneur who led public demonstrations against Thaksin, told an audience in the USA that in future he would “work only with the middle class who have sufficient education to truly understand how populist politicians can abuse power” (cited in Keyes, 2006).

Thaksin’s populism is often equated with his policies, especially the three-point electoral platform of 2001 (cheap health care, agrarian debt relief, village funds). It can quite properly be argued that such policies are the everyday stuff of electoral politics and do not deserve the label of populism. The equation of Thaksin’s populism with this programme also gives the impression that Thaksin’s populism was present at least from the time of his rise to power.

In this article, we argue that Thaksin’s populism was more complex than his policy offering; that it developed over time in response to social demand; that it has strong affinities with political trends elsewhere in the world owing to a common political economy; and that it helped provoke the urban middle-class rejection of Thaksin, which was background to the coup.

The first part of the article plots the growth of Thaksin’s populism, showing that it became by stages a much more important part of Thaksin’s public politics. The second part argues that a policy platform was only one aspect of Thaksin’s populism, and that two others were the projection of a relationship between political leader and supporters that was dramatically new in the Thai context, and an explicit attack on the form of liberal democracy which has been the template for Thailand’s constitutional development. The third part argues that Thaksin’s embrace of populism was not mere opportunism but the response to social demand. To put it another way, Thaksin may indeed have been opportunistic, but there would have been no opportunity if there had not been a social demand. This demand was a function of social forces created by Thailand’s pattern of development in the era of outward-orientation and neo-liberalism.

The fourth section compares Thaksin with other examples of modern populism, especially in Latin America. There is often resistance to such comparison on grounds that the histories and social profiles of Latin America and South-east Asia are so different. But the similarities between the Thaksin regime and certain examples in Latin America, especially Fujimori’s Peru, are so striking that it is worth looking at the extensive analysis of Latin American populism for help in understanding Thaksin. One key message of this comparison is that populism mutates and matures. Another is that populist regimes which lack mass organisation easily fall victim to elite attack. The final section looks at the role of Thaksin’s populism in the crisis of 2006.

Although in the past there have been attempts to define populism in terms of ideology or organisational form, scholars nowadays tend to accept the term as a broad description. Kenneth Roberts (2006) summarised “the essential core of populism” as “the political mobilization of mass constituencies by personalistic leaders who challenge established elites.” He argued that such movements encompass many shades of ideology, and various types of organisation. We use the term in this broad sense.

**Becoming a Populist**

When Thaksin formed the Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party in July 1998, there was little sign of his later populism. Thaksin was a spectacularly successful
businessman from a prominent business family in Chiang Mai. On founding the party, he explained that its principal mission was to rescue Thai businessmen from the 1997 financial crisis and to restore economic growth (The Nation, 15 July 1998).

He later broadened his political mission to include reforms that would modernise Thailand, especially the bureaucracy and the political system, and hence prevent the recurrence of financial crises in the future. The slogan chosen for his party – “Think new, act new for every Thai” – reflected the image he projected as a modernist and reformer. In the statement of his political ideas at this time, there is no social agenda except for one brief general commitment “to bring happiness to the majority of the country.” The single-minded focus is on “enabling Thailand to keep up and be competitive with other countries” (Walaya, 1999: 211).

The 23 founding members of the party, and the 44 members of a kind of shadow cabinet publicised a year later included only one figure identified with rural or mass issues. Thaksin’s speeches of this era do not make use of the term “the people” and do not imagine any social change other than the triumph of business over bureaucracy. For the 2001 elections, the initial party platform focused on measures to help small and medium businesses, and the centrepiece of the media campaign was a dramatisation of Thaksin’s own life in which he was cast as a poor boy who made good as a rich businessman – a distillation of the lives and legends of Thailand’s urban society of Thai-Chinese migrant families, not of its rural society of frontier rice farmers. As signals of his modernism, Thaksin appeared in public in a suit, the uniform of business, and littered his speeches with English words and references to the sayings of Bill Gates (Pasuk and Baker, 2004: Ch. 3).

To put together a broader campaign platform, Thaksin drew on the services of a group of former student radicals from the 1970s era. The key contact was Phumtham Vejjayachai, who had met Thaksin in 1975-76 when Thaksin worked as an aide to a minister who had to negotiate with leaders of the student movement. In response to a call for policy ideas, another 1970s student leader turned orchard farmer, Praphat Panyachatrak, contributed a scheme of agrarian debt relief. This subsequently became the first item in a platform designed for rural appeal (The Nation, 28 March 2000, 23 March 2001).

Subsequently, the TRT policy team adopted ideas for a universal health scheme which had been developed over some time within health-orientated NGOs. The scheme was based initially on an insurance model with a low annual premium, but was subsequently changed to a retail model with a low price per visit (Viroj and Anchana, 2006). This mass platform was rounded off by a scheme of village funds essentially similar to a scheme which Kukrit Pramoj and Boonchu Rojanasatian had launched in 1975 (Bangkok Post, 17 August 2000).

This three-point platform figured in the campaign material that TRT distributed, especially in rural areas, in the two months before the election. But the agrarian debt scheme and village funds were not evidence of any special tilt towards rural issues on the part of Thaksin and TRT. The policy team also contacted activists working with urban labour, and put together a programme appealing to this interest (Brown and Hewison, 2005). In the same way, TRT attempted to appeal to businessmen, environmental groups, the moral reform lobby and various other sectional interests. It was trying to please everyone.
At the polls in January 2001, TRT won two seats less than an absolute majority. Thaksin’s policy platform was strikingly new and will have contributed to the result, but it would be wrong to imagine, with the benefit of hindsight, that this was a populist victory. Many factors contributed to this result (see especially McCargo and Ukrit, 2005: Ch. 3; Nelson, 2002; Ockey, 2003): the opposition Democrats were damned by their association with the IMF’s disastrous crisis recovery programme; other parties and politicians were still suffering financially from the crisis; Thaksin was successful in persuading many established politicians to join his party; and the electoral system introduced under the 1997 Constitution was designed to deliver fewer but larger parties than in the past. Thaksin drew attention because of his platform, but even more because of his novelty as a leader and because of his wealth. Opinion polls run after the election found that many voters believed the TRT platform was simply “too good to be true” (Bangkok Post, 12 February 2001).

While in the international context populism is an old term with many meanings, it is important to understand that in the Thai context it was a totally new word and wholly defined by its usage with reference to Thaksin. Anek (2006: 78) showed that “prior to 2001 and Thaksin’s election victory, the terms populism and populist were used by almost nobody in academic circles, the media, or the society at large.”

Just two weeks after the election, Kasian Tejapira (2001a; 2001b) wrote articles in Matichon, applying the term populism to Thaksin and TRT, and explaining to his audience what the word meant. At first, however, he used a Thai transliteration, poppiwlit. The term was so new and unfamiliar that no translation was in common usage. In the same week, two Thai academics translated the term as prachaniyom during a seminar in Thammasat University. Kasian switched to this term in his article on 3 February and Anek (2006: 79) suspected this was the first time this Thai word was used in print.

Bidding for Popular Support

Thaksin’s embrace of populism had two main stages, both when he found himself under attack. In December 2000, Thaksin was indicted by the National Counter Corruption Commission for failing to report his assets accurately in three statutory declarations made when he served briefly as a minister in the mid-1990s. If found guilty, Thaksin faced a five-year ban on participation in politics. He fought the case with legal arguments and with attempts to suborn the judges, but also deployed two other strategies.

First, he manufactured a public presence significantly greater than that attempted by any previous Thai prime minister, primarily by using state-owned media now under his control. He launched a weekly radio show in which he talked to the nation for an hour about his activities and his thoughts on issues of the day. He dominated the daily television news and also appeared in several special programmes, including an evening chat show in which he lamented his predecessors’ handling of the economy. In the final climactic sessions of the assets case, he walked the final stretch to the court through an avenue of supporters, pressing the flesh like an American electoral candidate. In an extraordinary innovation, the final summaries by plaintiff and defence in the assets case were run live as a television special.
Secondly, his government implemented the three-point electoral programme with extraordinary speed. For the health scheme, a workshop was held in February, a pilot scheme launched in April, and the roll-out (except in Bangkok) completed in October (Viroj and Anchana, 2006). The agrarian debt relief scheme was made available to 2.3 million debtors by the same month (Bangkok Post, 18 October 2001), while by September the scheme of village funds was extended to most of the country’s 75,000 villages and 5.3 million loans approved (Worawan, 2003). The three schemes were immediately popular.

Thaksin’s personal popularity, measured by a monthly poll, rose from around 30% in December 2000 before the election to a peak of 70% in May 2001 as the asset case decision approached (The Nation, 7 January 2002).

With this change in public presence and popularity went a change of rhetoric. In direct reaction to the assets charge, Thaksin announced a new and leading feature of his political mission: “Nothing will stand in my way. I am determined to devote myself to politics in order to lead the Thai people out of poverty” (The Nation, 23 December 2000). He and his aides portrayed the assets case as a conspiracy by Thailand’s old elite to remove someone who had been elected “by the people” and was dedicated to work “for the people.” Thaksin said on the eve of the verdict, “The people want me to stay and the people know what’s right for Thailand. And who should I be more loyal to? The people? Or to the Court? I love people. I want to work for them” (Time, Asia edition, 13 August 2001: 19).

In rhetoric, over the nine months of the asset case, Thaksin went from modernist reformer championing businessmen in the face of economic crisis, to populist championing the poor against an old elite. By late 2001, academics and journalists, both Thai and foreign, used the term populist more regularly in reference to Thaksin. But most analysts still pictured Thaksin primarily as a business politician who had adopted populist policies as a strategy to win popular acquiescence for reforms designed primarily in the interests of capital. Kevin Hewison (2004) dubbed this formula a “new social contract.”

**Going to the People**

The second stage of Thaksin’s development as a populist began in late March 2004. Thaksin came under increasing attack in the press and on public platforms, especially over his management of the upsurge of violence in the far south, but more generally over a range of issues including corruption, government aid for Shinawatra businesses, the privatisation of state enterprises, and the government’s handling of avian influenza. With an election approaching in early 2005, Thaksin reacted quickly to secure his electoral support in the countryside. He launched a series of tours covering every region of the country. His motorcade swept into villages and district centres, where provincial officials and local leaders had been gathered. Flanked by other ministers and high officials from the capital, Thaksin listened to reports on local problems and petitions for budget assistance. In many cases, he then gave instant approval for projects, using a vastly expanded central fund under his own control which he had created by reforms in the budget process. In a seven-day swing through the north-east in April 2004, he pledged approval of projects totalling 100 billion baht (The Nation, 28 April 2004). In a six-day swing through the north in
July, he pledged approval of projects totalling six billion baht (The Nation, 23 July 2004). He visited the central provinces in several shorter trips, and the south in August. In Chiang Mai he promised to rid the city of poverty within three years. In Nakhon Pathom, he told students, “Come and tell me if you don’t have a notebook [computer] yet and I will buy one for you out of my own pocket” (The Nation, 14 May 2004). Thaksin also invited all Bangkok’s taxi drivers to Government House for lunch (The Nation, 16 May 2004).

In the month prior to the election in February 2005, Thaksin made further tours, mainly in rural areas of the north and north-east. Election law forbade any instant handouts in this period, but Thaksin announced a much more elaborate programme of election promises than in 2001, including an extension of the village funds, land deeds for every landholder, a government pond dug for anyone prepared to pay a small fuel cost, four new cheap loan schemes, free distribution of cows, training schemes for the poor, cheaper school fees, special payments for children forced to drop out of school because of poverty, an educational gift bag for every new mother, care centres for the elderly, more sports facilities in urban areas, cheaper phone calls, an end to eviction from slums, more cheap housing, lower taxes, more investment in the universal health scheme, a nationwide scheme of irrigation, and a deadline for the end to poverty – “Four years ahead, there will be no poor people. Won’t that be neat?” (Thaksin, 2005; see also The Nation, 18, 19 October 2004; Bangkok Post, 7 November 2004). For this election, the modernist “Think new, act new” slogan of 2001 was replaced by the intensely populist, “The heart of TRT is the people.”

After the 2005 election, Thaksin toured less but made increasing use of a practice, begun in 2001, of holding occasional “mobile Cabinet meetings” in an upcountry location. These events similarly created occasions for local people and officials to present petitions to Thaksin, and for Thaksin to pledge local budget spending, all in full view of the public media. This strategy climaxed in January 2006 when Thaksin led a troop of ministers and senior officials to spend a week in At Samat in Roi-et province, one of Thailand’s poorest districts, supposedly to devise systems for eradicating poverty which could then be replicated elsewhere.

These events dramatised Thaksin bringing government to the people, and were rewarded by increased popularity. Even though very little concrete action resulted from the At Samat poverty experiment, popular support for Thaksin in this area increased dramatically from an already high level. Although the motorcades, mobile Cabinet meetings and the poverty experiment reached only a small sample of places, the events were magnified by display on television. The poverty experiment ran all day on live television as a form of “reality show.” The upcountry tours provided opportunities for Thaksin to be photographed in homely situations – emerging from a village bath-house in a pakoma (common man’s lower cloth); transported on a village tractor (i-taen); riding a motorbike down a dusty village street; accepting flowers from toothless old ladies.

In this period, Thaksin changed his public appearance and speech. He shed his business suit in favour of shirtsleeves with buttons open at the neck, sometimes all down to his waist, and his hair lightly tousled. He stopped littering his speeches with English to denote internationalism and modernity, and instead used dialect and earthy humour. He stopped quoting Bill Gates, and instead often mentioned his own family and sex life. The format of his weekly radio show underwent a subtle
Thaksin’s Three Messages

I Give to All of You

Thaksin’s government had launched three major schemes of social provision, and promised many more. The distinctive characteristic of most of these schemes was that they were available to all. Previous governments had provided cheap or free health care for the poor by distributing cards. However, through corruption and inefficiency, these cards reached only a minority of the families that deserved and needed them. Using these cards carried a stigma, and often subjected the holder to poor treatment. Thaksin’s health scheme was available to all as a right, and significantly extended access to health care. According to the Thailand Development Research Institute (TDRI), which was generally critical of Thaksin, the scheme lifted more people out of poverty than any other single government measure. While there remained a service differential between the 30 baht scheme and private treatment, participation in the scheme conveyed no stigma and the treatment was mostly judged to be good (Viroj and Anchana, 2006). In polls, the health scheme regularly rated as the TRT government’s most popular measure (e.g. The Nation, 26 September 2004). This popularity outstripped actual experience of the scheme. People who had not used the scheme liked the idea of it.

In the same way, the debt relief scheme was available to all indebted farmers, and the village funds extended to every village. The slew of schemes floated in the 2005 election campaign offered provisions for everyone through every stage of life – from birth through education and employment to old age.

As Pitch (2004) has argued, people felt empowered by the TRT schemes, partly through the very real impact of the programmes, partly through the impression that Thaksin and his party were responsive to their demands, and partly because the schemes positioned each citizen in an equal and direct relationship with the state. From interviews and observation in Mahasarakham in 2005, Charles Keyes (pers. comm., February 2007) concluded,

The relationship with the rural populace was clearly symbiotic and grew over time. As villagers benefited from Thaksin’s populist programs, they felt empowered because they were responsible for putting him in power…. In one interview, a middle-aged villager said that in the past people in Bangkok controlled politics, but today we villagers do.

I Belong to You

Thaksin transformed himself into a public property over which people felt they had some ownership. He used the media and public appearances to convey an image of
constant and dominating presence in public space. He re-crafted the presentation of himself to become much less distant from the ordinary person. He distinguished himself from previous political leaders and from other figures in the political arena including officials, academics and journalists. He delighted in provoking criticism from such figures and then boasting about such criticism on his radio shows, upcountry tours and election appearances. He understood that presenting himself as an enemy of Thailand’s political elite conveyed an appealing message to his mass audience.

Deft use of the media is, of course, commonplace in modern politics in any country. But, in Thailand, Thaksin’s development of a powerful public image was new and broke many local conventions. On public appearances, he was received in scenes normally reserved for rock stars and certainly never before seen around a Thai political leader.

*I am the Mechanism which can Translate the Will of the People into State Action*

In many of his public statements from 2004 onwards, the government was reduced to the first person singular. For example, in his last speech before the 2005 poll, Thaksin spoke as follows:

I will make the Thai economy improve. I have already raised the GDP from 4.8 to 6.5, and now I will take it from 6.5 to 9 trillion [baht]. I will increase exports. I will expand the markets...I will fix the economy by fixing the problem of poverty...I ended the IMF loan. I changed the status of the country from one which chases around borrowing money to one which lends...I will take care of kids by developing their brains...I will change the way of giving financial support to universities...I will build more sport stadiums and more parks...I already gave officials a salary adjustment in 2002, and I will give another...I will provide opportunities for people to study at university level without their parents having to open their wallets (Thaksin, 2005).

At this and other campaign meetings, he dispensed with the usual ritual of introducing the local party candidate, and instead launched into his speech as if the election were a presidential poll. His domination of television news became so overwhelming that other ministers spent ministry budgets to buy billboard space to display their face and achievements. In a specially televised Cabinet meeting, Thaksin presented himself as a traditional *taokae* (Chinese boss) commanding and instructing a group of passive subordinates. He told NGOs that they no longer had any role because there was no need for intermediaries between the leader and the people. After the landslide 2005 election victory, Thaksin constantly repeated, “I have the votes of 19 million of the people.”

In his speeches before the 2005 election, Thaksin offered himself as the vehicle through which the wishes of the people could be translated into action on the part of government.

These past four years, this kind of change was not by chance or *fluke* [in English], but because of the power of your belief in me. I work hard, don’t I? If I
work hard, but you don’t believe in me, there could be no trust. But when you believe in me, then people listen when I speak, and bureaucrats are not stubborn, because they listen to the people. This is democracy...I have the same power as prime minister as every person who is prime minister. But I have special power more than the others because I do what I say I will do. People put faith and belief in me, don’t they? (Thaksin, 2005).

Thaksin devalued the importance of parliament, neutralised the check-and-balance bodies of the 1997 constitution, micro-managed the electronic media and said in public that law, the rule-of-law, democracy and human rights were not important because they often got in the way of “working for the people.” In his 2005 election speeches, he suggested to his audience that the bundle of liberal democracy – rule of law, freedom of criticism, human rights, oversight by parliamentary opposition, checks and balances on the executive – had done little for them in the past, and that making him into a powerful executive would deliver them greater benefit. He described criticism by press or opposition as “destructive” and exhorted his audience, “We want politics with meaning, don’t we? We want politics which have something for the people, don’t we? And this politics which is just destructive, can we get rid of it yet?” (Thaksin, 2005). In his public criticism of opponents, he focused especially on people associated with Thailand’s history of democratic development (Thirayuth Boonmi) or with the reform pressure of the 1990s (Prawase Wasi, Anand Panyarachun). On several occasions, he encouraged people to draw parallels between himself and authoritarian military leaders in the past, especially Sarit Thanarat, whose memory had become associated with direct and decisive action (e.g. *Matichon Raiwan*, 30 September 2003).

Thaksin’s authoritarian tendency was clear from the beginning of his premiership. It stemmed from his enormous self-confidence, his need to conceal the massive conflict-of-interest over his family business, and perhaps his police training and experience as an old-fashioned *taokae* of a family-based business. But Thaksin’s embrace of populism gave him a means to justify this authoritarianism as an alternative to the liberal model of democracy.

The Social Context of Populism

Thaksin’s populism was a response to social demand, with roots in the social structure moulded by Thailand’s strategy of outward-orientated economic development. With the development policies adopted by governments since the 1950s, Thailand became significantly more industrialised and urbanised. But Thailand’s decision to develop with a relatively open economy and high reliance on external sources of capital, technology, expertise and even labour resulted in a social structure that differs significantly from the classic pattern of the West, and that of the early Asian industrialisers such as Japan, Taiwan and Korea. Figure 1 is an attempt to sketch this social structure using labour force data (the 2004 Labour Force Survey, February round and the 2002 Industrial Survey).

The formal working class is small, accounting for around 8% of the workforce. By “formal” working class we mean those with relatively permanent employment in sizeable establishments. As a proxy, we use the numbers employed in manufacturing
in establishments with more than ten workers, as recorded in the Ministry of Industry's (2002) Industrial Survey. This is not “the working class” as a whole, which would be far larger. This formal working class is small because the multinational firms that dominate manufacturing tend to employ technology which is more capital-intensive than Thai conditions would merit. It is weak in bargaining power because of labour competition on a global scale, and suffers from the legacy of the Cold War when Thai governments devoted considerable care to controlling labour organisation through legal measures, political co-option and outright suppression (Brown, 2004).

The white-collar middle class is relatively large, at around 15% of the workforce. This figure is calculated from those with higher education and a professional, managerial or clerical job, as recorded in the Labour Force Survey. This class developed very rapidly over little more than a single generation because of the rapidly rising demand for skills to service the expanding modern economy.

The numbers remaining in agriculture have fallen, especially over the 1985-95 economic boom, yet still two-fifths of the workforce returns their major occupation as agriculture. However, for most nominally agrarian families, agriculture is no longer the sole source of income, and for many it is only a minor contributor. Because of low public investment directed towards the agricultural sector, a long-term trend of decline in international prices and environmental destruction, returns to agriculture have declined. Agrarian households rely on transfers from the urban economy to supplement their incomes.

There is a steady seepage of people from agriculture into the urban informal sector, which has ballooned to around a quarter of the workforce. This sector

Figure 1. Distribution of labour force, 2004
includes the whole “shophouse” sub-sector of “mom-and-pop” stores, and other family and micro-scale enterprises; vendors; the self-employed; many illegal or semi-legal enterprises; and a large workforce that floats between construction, seasonal agricultural work, sweatshops, legal and illegal services industries, and other forms of casual employment (Endo, n.d.).

The agricultural and urban informal sectors are linked closely through flows of people and remittance. For shorthand we will refer to these two combined as the informal mass. Together they account for around two-thirds of the workforce and roughly the same proportion of the electorate. As electoral democracy has developed in Thailand, the potential importance of this informal mass in politics has advanced in parallel. But numbers are only part of the story.

Those who depend for a living on the informal economy also tend to be involved in informal systems of social organisation and political regulation. As they are not directly affected by the taxation, budgetary spending or regulatory action of government, they have low motivation to invest in the organisation needed to make their weight felt in national politics. At the same time they are bound by informal linkages into clientelist politics (Anek, 2006; Khan, 2005). In Thailand, they were recruited into politics mainly through the hua khanaen (vote bank) systems of electoral organisation, in which candidates rely on village heads and other locally influential people to deliver the people’s votes (see the discussion in Walker, 2008, this issue).

However, the politics of the informal mass has changed markedly over the past two decades. Over the 1980s, the controls through which the military suppressed grassroots political organisation by intimidation and force during the Cold War were eased. From the late 1980s onwards, civil society movements raised political consciousness over issues concerning rights, environment, livelihood and equity. Then, in 1997, the financial crisis hit very hard on the informal mass. The two million who were immediately made unemployed by the crisis came mostly from this segment. Returns to agriculture were initially improved by the currency movements, but then sharply depressed. Numbers below the poverty line rose by three million (World Bank, 2001). Declining remittances from urban work knocked through into rising levels of agrarian debt. This severe and sudden impact had a politicising effect.

The two years following the crisis saw the biggest upsurge in rural protest since the early 1970s. The chief demands were for agricultural price support, agrarian debt relief, and land for the landless (Pasuk and Baker, 2000: Ch. 5). Thaksin and his advisers adopted exactly these demands. Agrarian debt relief was the first measure that Thaksin’s ex-activist advisors inserted into his rural electoral platform; Thaksin frequently distributed land deeds during his rural tours; and government support for rice prices became a key policy through which Thaksin consolidated rural support.8

Thaksin connected with the emerging political demands and aspirations of the informal mass. Although he was not an obvious candidate to become a populist leader, and although he had shown no interest in “the people” before 2000, he was drawn into this position by the mechanisms of electoral politics. As his political career was threatened, first by legal process, later by growing urban opposition, he discovered a new and powerful base of support in the growing political involvement of the informal mass. He gave them a form of leadership that brought their demands and aspirations to bear in national politics. At the same time, Thaksin’s programme,
leadership style and political message were shaped by the aspirations and insecurities of this support base. As Nithi Eoseewong observed, “‘Think new, act new’ is just somebody taking the dreams of Thai society and making them into policy” (in *Matichon Raiwan*, 26 May 2003).

The universalism of his policies had immediate appeal to people who lived and worked within informal rather than formal structures, and who often missed out on government schemes that were designed and delivered within a formal institutional frame. The failure of previous targeted schemes of subsidised health care are a good case in point. Similarly, his leadership style was a targeted appeal to the informal mass. He approximated the style of the local boss with a strong streak of personalism (“I do this for you”), a promise of generosity in return for loyal support, and a cavalier, tough-guy, dismissive attitude towards enemies. Finally, his promise to act as the mechanism through which popular demands would be translated into state action carried an implicit message that old-style politics, and the whole liberal-democratic bundle, had done little for the mass of the people.

Thaksin’s populism thus went far beyond a transactional relationship in which he appealed for support in return for a menu of policies. He tapped the aspirations, insecurities and sense of exclusion of this major segment of the population, and was rewarded with support that was both emotional and rational.

Brothers and sisters, look at me! My ribs are all cracked, because when they hug me, they hug me tight, solid, humph! Today, I was hugged a bit too heavily. My arms are starting to be different lengths. Today, I was pinched all over. But I’m happy because people have the feeling that I care for them. I want to see them escape poverty. They have placed their hope in me. I know that I’m taking heavy burdens on my shoulders with the things I’m saying here. But I’m confident I can do them. Someone born in the year of the ox in the middle of the day likes working hard – has to plough the field before he can eat the straw (Thaksin, 2005).

**Latin American Parallels**

Leaders with many similarities to Thaksin have appeared in many other countries in recent years. In Turkey in 2004, for example, a new prime minister whose party’s base of support comprises small-scale producers and the informal sector, launched a slew of populist schemes, and stood aggressively against the country’s political tradition going back to Ataturk in the 1920s (Carroll, 2004). However, the region where this political tradition has the longest history and the most extensive academic analysis is Latin America.

Several scholars detected a change in Latin American populism which began in the 1980s and continued into the following decade. In the prior era from the 1950s onwards, the dominant trend had been movements that built on organised labour and social movements to form mass parties delivering policies of protectionism, import substitution industrialisation, and redistribution through controls on prices and wages. The movements that emerged in the 1980s, and were dubbed neopopulism, were substantially different. They were detached from labour unions or
other civil society organisations. They had little permanent organisation, only \textit{ad hoc} electoral campaigns. The policies through which they courted popularity were mostly forms of welfare provision, while their macroeconomic management largely accepted the neo-liberal framework advocated by the US (Conniff, 1999; Roberts, 1995; Weyland, 1996).

Two main schools of thought emerged to explain this shift in Latin American populism. The first concentrated on the political economy. Labour movements had declined with the rise of multinational capital and the development of an internationalised labour market, while the decay of agriculture had swelled numbers in the informal sector, creating a “disorganised mass.” This mass was mobilised as a political force by a “critical juncture,” such as a severe cyclical economic crisis, or the delegitimation of an old ruling elite. The second explanation, coming from the rational choice tendency in political science, argued that the rise of mass media had supplanted the need for political entrepreneurs to use “labour intensive” techniques of mass mobilisation (Roberts, 2006). These two arguments are not mutually exclusive, though it is difficult to see how the rational choice version can work without some political economy underpinning.

The most striking example of this era of neo-populism was Alberto Fujimori’s Peru. As an ethnic Japanese former professor of agronomy, Fujimori was a total outsider to the old political elite and enjoyed very limited support only a few months before his rise to power in 1990. He was swept to the presidency on a wave of emotional reaction against the old political elite in the aftermath of an economic crisis. He consolidated his support with a raft of welfare schemes, which included universal health care and other mainly universal schemes. He systematically undermined the parliament, media and judiciary by bribery on a massive scale, while simultaneously telling his supporters that democratic institutions were a hindrance to his efforts on their behalf (Ellner, 2003; McMillan and Zoido, 2004; Roberts, 2006).

Fujimori was far from alone. Menem in Argentina and de Mello in Brazil followed similar patterns in the early 1990s. Kurt Weyland (1996: 10) summarised the populist leaders of Latin America in this era as follows: “They... appeal to unorganized, largely poor people in the informal sector, have an adversarial relation to many organized groups in civil society, and attack the established ‘political class’ as their main enemy.” They rely on “a strongly top-down approach and... strengthening the apex of the state in order to effect profound economic reform and to boost the position of the personal leader.” They have tended “to ally with the army, sideline or destroy existing political institutions (unions, parties), and manipulate the media.” They also tended to align with the USA, acquiesce in neo-liberalism and pursue rapid economic growth to win the support of local business elites. The similarities to Thaksin are obvious.

In short, Thaksin’s populism is far from unique but follows in broad outline a pattern that was dominant in Latin America a decade or so earlier. But the Latin American case has a second important learning. Populist politics are not static. Just as neo-liberal neo-populism supplanted an earlier “classic” era, so neo-populism has already been supplanted by distinctly new trends in Latin America. In the last few years, movements embracing leftist ideologies of varying degrees have won power through the ballot box in Venezuela, Brazil, Uruguay and Chile, while mass
movements have toppled conservative or centrist presidents in Ecuador, Argentina and Bolivia.

This shift appears to have many elements, which operate in greater or lesser degrees in different countries. First, there is a growing popular reaction against neo-liberal policies which can be tapped in electoral campaigns, particularly through promises to roll back the penetration of multinational capital in these economies. Secondly, there is a rise in anti-Americanism – or at least a drop in deference to the USA – which is probably attributable to the international rejection of the George W. Bush presidency. Thirdly, there is some mobilisation of class interests on ethnic lines, most obvious in the election of Evo Morales in Bolivia in 2005.

The point is that populism evolves and mutates in response to ideological development, shifts in the political economy and changes in the international environment.

**Organisation and Party**

In the neo-populism phase, Latin American populism moved away from mobilisation based on structured parties and social movements towards looser organisations and “electoral populism” in which the party existed only for the purpose of election campaigning. Fujimori is again a primary example. He formed a new party on each of the three occasions that he stood for election and promptly abandoned or disbanded the party in the aftermath of his victory. The lack of any institutional form to bind Fujimori to his electoral promises gave him the freedom to woo local business and make his settlement with the USA (Ellner, 2003; Roberts, 2006).

Roberts argued that change in the degree of organisation by Latin American populists is not a trend over time but a function of the fierceness of opposition. Populist leaders who face no serious response from an old elite can afford to operate without any organised base of support, but those that provoke opposition need defences.

Populist leaders are often polarizing figures who generate fervent loyalties and intense opposition, particularly among elites who feel threatened by populist reforms, rhetoric, redistributive measures, or mobilizational tactics. The more radical the discourse and behavior of populist leaders, the more intense the opposition, and the more likely that socio-political conflict will be channelled into extra-electoral arenas. These conflicts create incentives for populist figures to organize and empower their followers for political combat. Followers not only vote, but they may be called upon to mobilize for rallies and demonstrations, participate in strikes and occupations, or even take up arms to defend their leader in times of peril (Roberts, 2006).

Fujimori’s lack of organised support eventually became “a congenital defect of Fujimorismo.” When the extent of the organised corruption that underpinned the regime became public in 2000, the government collapsed and Fujimori had to flee into exile (McMillan and Zoido, 2004). Roberts cites the contrasting example of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela. He also began with no substantial party organisation,
and came to power through a clandestine movement in the military, and spontaneous acclaim at the ballot box. However, as his radical policies alienated the USA and large sections of elite and middle-class opinion in Venezuela, Chavez responded by founding a network of grassroots organisations called “Bolivarian circles.” When his enemies ousted Chavez by coup in April 2001, he was able to regain power through his remaining influence in the army, and his ability to organise people on the streets and at the polling stations. He subsequently founded a more conventional party organisation that claimed 20,000 base units by 2003 (Roberts, 2006).

Thaksin’s TRT party closely resembled the loose form of electoral populism in Latin America. It differed little from other Thai parties except in the scale of its funding (McCargo and Ukrist, 2005, Ch. 3). Its prime function was to orchestrate election campaigns. It held an annual conference, and occasional regional meetings, principally as rituals to celebrate the party leader. The party claimed to have signed up eight million members before the 2001 election (The Nation, 18 December 2000) and extended that to 14 million by the 2005 poll (The Nation, 21 February 2005). But these members paid no party dues, engaged in no party activities and had no part in selecting the party executive. There was no formal channel for party members to influence policy. Thaksin’s aides used market research techniques to help formulate policies. The party membership list served principally as a database for election campaigning.

TRT organised for the 2001 election by the classic tactic of persuading factions of sitting MPs to join the party on the expectation that TRT would form the next government and be in a position to reward them (Ockey, 2003). Thaksin thus attached the existing clientelist networks, which extended down from the MPs into the localities, to his new party. He continued this strategy after the election by persuading two surviving parties to merge into TRT. At the 2005 poll, the influence of TRT as a party, Thaksin as a leader and the clientelist networks of individual MPs are impossible to disentangle. The MPs were bound to the party by constitutional barriers against splitting away, and by the continued expectation that TRT would again win. TRT as a party thus continued to draw on their clientelist networks.

Prior to the 2001 election, Thaksin and his aides toyed with schemes to ally civil society groups to his party. In particular, Thaksin appeared in public with the Assembly of the Poor, the most prominent activist coalition of the 1990s. He promised to act on their agenda of complaints and won their endorsement for his election campaign (Bangkok Post, 19 December 2000). Similarly, TRT met with representatives of organised labour, resulting in a nine-point policy document, and endorsement of TRT’s election campaign by labour organisations (Brown and Hewison, 2005). But Thaksin reneged on both these promises. When the party’s labour policy was submitted to parliament in the month after the election, four of the nine points had already disappeared, including those considered the most important – ratifying the ILO conventions on freedom of association and collective bargaining, and establishing an occupational health and safety institute. Organised labour’s support for Thaksin dwindled and turned to outright opposition over privatisation in 2003 (Brown and Hewison, 2005). The Assembly of the Poor’s major demand was decommissioning the Pak Mun dam which disrupted the ecology of a major river and the livelihoods of people depending on it. Thaksin visited the dam...
and called for research on the issue, but then personally made a summary decision to retain the dam before the studies were even completed. The Assembly of the Poor turned hostile (*Bangkok Post*, 8, 9 January 2003).

Subsequently Thaksin avoided arrangements with civil society groups which might place him under some obligation to deliver against his promises. Once in power, with a virtual monopoly control over the electronic media, he relied on his ability to dominate public space to secure public support.

However, as opposition increased from 2004, Thaksin not only intensified his efforts to win public support by populist strategies, but also began to consider strengthening the party as an organisation. In campaign speeches before the 2005 poll, he promised that TRT would soon introduce a system to allow local party members to select the TRT candidate on the model of the US primaries (Thaksin, 2005). In July 2005, the TRT party moved into massive new offices in two buildings (of 8 and 14 storeys) previously occupied by a state bank, and Thaksin announced his aim to “institutionalise” the party (*The Nation*, 15 July 2005). Nothing concrete had emerged, however, before the 2006 coup.

Instead, he tried to mobilise support through informal means. His lieutenant for this task was Newin Chidchob. Before the 2005 poll, Newin was sent to the south in an apparent attempt to disrupt the Democrat Party’s support base through wholesale vote-buying delivered through the bureaucratic apparatus. The scheme was exposed and had to be abandoned. As opposition to Thaksin accumulated over 2005 and early 2006, Newin was involved in organising support among Bangkok taxi drivers and among farmers’ groups from the north-east. The taxi drivers were occasionally assembled for shows of support for Thaksin in the capital. In 2006, groups of north-eastern farmers travelled to Bangkok and set up camp in a city park to serve as a counter to the demonstrations organised by Sondhi Limthongkul and the People’s Alliance for Democracy, and to demonstrate against newspapers that opposed Thaksin (Kasian, 2006: 8-10). Thaksin’s aides threatened to bring a million farmers to the city.

As with Fujimori, the lack of any strong organisational base proved to be a “congenital defect.” Thaksin and TRT crumbled when confronted by opposition from the palace, the military and a hostile middle class.

**Populism and the Coup**

What is the significance of Thaksin’s populism for analysing the coup of 19 September 2006? As Hewison argues (2008, this issue), the coup was very much a royalist event. Yet it depended also on urban middle-class support in the public space of the media and public platforms. The army’s planning for the coup appears to have begun after an attempt by a Thaksin ally to buy up the Matichon press group in September 2005 turned the press and intellectuals openly hostile, and after the Shinawatra family’s tax-free sale of Shin Corp in January 2006 provoked a gut reaction in the tax-paying middle class.

Royalist opposition to Thaksin was evident from the beginning of his first government in 2001 and thus predates the development of his populism, though that opposition undoubtedly increased as the implications of Thaksin’s populist leadership became clearer.
The evolution of Thaksin’s populism and the growth of middle-class opposition were interrelated in a kind of dialectic: as Thaksin lost urban middle-class support, he intensified his populist appeal to the informal mass; as Thaksin’s populism became more strident, the middle class felt more alienated.9 Thaksin’s threat to bring millions of rural supporters into the capital was the logical conclusion to this spiral, and a key trigger for staging the coup. Beneath this interplay lay the massive gap in incomes between city and village, and a long-standing middle-class fear of empowerment of the rural mass. The threat which the middle class perceived in Thaksin’s populism was partly fear that they would be obliged to pay for his redistributive schemes,10 but more fear that they would no longer have a privileged position to influence the state agenda. Sondhi Limthongkul, who set out to channel middle-class aspirations, stated explicitly that Thaksin had to be overthrown in order to restore political influence to the middle class. In talks given in the USA following the coup, Sondhi was reported as follows:

He [Sondhi] argued that there cannot be electoral democracy in Thailand such as is found in the West because most people outside the middle class lack sufficient knowledge to understand how power can be abused. The rural people only vote, he claimed, for those who pay them either directly through party organizers (hua khanaen) or indirectly through the populist programs. He compared the populist programs of Thaksin to those of Peron in Argentina. Khun Sondhi said that in the future he himself will work only with the middle class who have sufficient education to truly understand how populist politicians can abuse power (Keyes, 2006).

A more detailed rejection appeared in a book Thaksina-prachaniyom [Thaksin-style populism] completed in mid-2006 in parallel with the countdown to the coup. Anek Laothamatas is a prominent political scientist who entered politics in the late 1990s, became an MP under the Democrat Party in 2001, and switched to lead the Mahachon Party which was annihilated at the 2005 poll. Anek (2006) argued that the rural electorate supported Thaksin because his populist policies were in their self-interest, but these “irresponsible” policies had made people dependent on handout welfare, politicised the bureaucracy and would result in fiscal crises of the sort endemic to Latin American populist regimes. Anek suggested alternative policy offerings, including a version of TRT’s policies cleansed of their intrinsic irresponsibility and dishonesty, and an adaptation of the third-way welfarism of Anthony Giddens. But ultimately Anek seemed to doubt that these policy offerings would sway the Thai electorate, and instead offered a political solution.

Anek argued that populism would outlast Thaksin because it was founded on the surviving vertical linkages in rural society. Thailand’s rural voters were not free agents but bound by patron-client ties. Where they had once been clients of a local boss, they had now been transformed into clients of a national boss and his party (Anek, 2006: 123-4). In this social setting a “pure democracy” was bound to lead to de Tocqueville’s “tyranny of the majority” and irresponsible populism. Anek’s answer was that, “A better democracy is a balanced compromise between three elements: the representatives of the lower classes who are the majority in the country, the middle class, and the upper class” (Anek, 2006: 177). In this democracy, the only
time when everybody would have equal rights would be when they dropped their ballot paper in the box. After that “the importance of each person will depend on knowledge, ability, experience, and status,” so that the wishes of the majority would not be able to replace “what is correct according to ethics and academic principles” (Anek, 2006: 178-9).

The “tyranny of the majority” would be avoided by ensuring that the opinions of two groups had special weight. The first, Anek called ekaburat and translated as “monarchy,” but glossed that this was not simply equivalent to royalty, but comprised “a small number of upper class people who are leaders or governors of the country at the highest level, who are prominent by their office and by themselves, and who command the trust of the majority.” The second group, Anek called apichon and translated this as “aristocrats.” This included “the middle and upper classes, especially the leaders with wisdom and experience in politics and administration,” including senior bureaucrats, top intellectuals, and senior journalists (Anek, 2006: 178, 179, 181). He cited examples of samurai and medieval knights as apichon who “had won acceptance of state and people through leadership on the battlefield” (Anek, 2006: 181), and this is perhaps a metaphor for the military. Anek claimed that such a “mixed system” had in fact been in operation in Thailand “ever since October 1973” (Anek, 2006: 183). A major duty of this leadership would be to educate the lower classes so that they “upgraded their needs and demands” to be less self-interested, and more aware of the interests of society and nation.

For the longer term, it would be necessary to transform rural society through education, welfare and employment “to make rural people stronger and more self-reliant so they do not remain clients of state policy.” This would “benefit the middle class and those in the city as the rural people would no longer be the foundation for populist-style democracy” (Anek, 2006: 198).

Both Anek and Sondhi argued that Thaksin’s populism mobilised popular support for change, and that more power had to be given to the elite and middle class to prevent this. The rise of Thaksin’s populism was a crucial part of the background against which the assault on Matichon and the Shin Corp sale could bring the middle class onto the streets.

Conclusion

Thaksin Shinawatra was an unlikely candidate to become a populist leader. Prior to his arraignment for false asset disclosure in December 2000, he had shown little interest in rural society and made no reference to “the people” in his rhetoric. He made a bid for popular support, but thereby became the instrument of popular aspirations. He was swept along by social forces shaped by Thailand’s strategy of outward-orientated development and subjection to neo-liberalism. The content of his populism began with a simple raft of redistributive policies which responded to the needs and aspirations of the informal mass that constituted around two-thirds of the workforce and the electorate. Thaksin subsequently went much further by responding not only to this constituency’s demand for political goods, but also for a leader they felt they could own. People supported Thaksin because he gave them cheap health care and accessible credit, but also because he gave them a feeling of empowerment. Thaksin appealed to people by setting himself up as the enemy of the
“old politics” represented by the bureaucracy and the Democrat Party; by adopting the familiar style of the local boss inflated to the national scale; and by arguing that his personal leadership would deliver more than the old liberal-democratic model, which had failed to prevent massive inequality in economy and society. Thaksin’s populism was thus not just a policy platform, but matches the three key points of Roberts’ definition, namely mass mobilisation, personalised leadership and a challenge to established elites.

In the old model of “development,” based on the historical experience of the West, industrialisation creates a domestic capitalism, urban working class, and white-collar middle class; these new social forces sweep away old social and political elites, and support liberal democracy as the best means to resolve the conflicts among themselves. This model was replicated in the post-Second World War transformation of Japan, Korea and Taiwan but has since become irrelevant. Since the collapse of the Cold War, the West has lost interest in nurturing domestic capitalism in developing countries and sees the outside world solely as a field of expansion for Western capitalism. Countries like Thailand find the barriers against independent industrialisation are now too high, and choose instead to adopt outward-orientated development strategies and become dependent links in the global production chains of multinational capital. This strategy results in a very different social evolution. The domestic capitalist class is weak and embattled; the formal working class is small and politically marginal; the white-collar working class is conscious of its dependence on global forces; and a high proportion of the population remains in declining agriculture or in a swelling urban informal sector. Thaksin’s populist politics echoed themes visible elsewhere in South-east Asia, in Latin America, and in Eastern Europe because the political economy underpinnings and neo-liberal framework are similar.

Latin America offers the most interesting parallels because of the long history of populism in the region, and the consequent subtlety of its academic analysis and debate on the topic. Thaksin’s populism had strong affinities with a phase of Latin American populism in the 1980s and 1990s, in which the most striking example was Fujimori’s Peru. These populist regimes tapped the support of the informal mass by offering universalist schemes of welfare and redistribution, and by posing as enemies of an old political elite. These regimes was careful to direct their fire against the political and social elite, while simultaneously co-operating with US neo-liberalism in external policies, and supporting domestic business. Fujimori undermined the parliamentary system, media and judiciary with corrupt money flows, while promoting an alternative model of personal, authoritarian rule. In order to avoid incurring obligations to their support constituency and to retain their freedom of action to negotiate with other social forces, populist leaders of this era dispensed with mass party structures and close links with civil society organisation, and relied instead on modern media and mass communication to mobilise electoral support. The cost of this strategy was insecurity, especially in the face of elite counter-attack. Most of these regimes lasted between two and five years. Fujimori was the exception, surviving for a decade, but ultimately falling just as precipitately.

This phase of populism in Latin America has since been superseded. The new wave of leaders, exemplified by Chavez, Lula da Silva and Morales, has seen a return to more explicit leftist ideology, mobilisation of ethnic divisions, and new types of mass
organisation. We are not implying that Thailand’s populism strain will move in the same direction, only that the Latin American story shows that populism evolves in response to social change, the external environment and local history.

Thaksin’s populist leadership challenged the monarchy’s claim to be the sole focus of political loyalty. It threatened the ability of key sections of the middle class to influence politics – businessmen through money, bureaucrats through position and tradition, and media and intellectuals through command of public space. It promised to replace Thailand’s plural, managed democracy with something akin to a personalised one-party regime. Thaksin’s populism was thus a key factor in assembling the support that persuaded the military to undertake a manoeuvre which had generally been counter-productive for its own interests over the prior quarter-century.

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Notes

1 According to another definition, populism is any movement that “mobilises those who feel themselves to be disadvantaged by socioeconomic and political dislocation, as well as a leadership style that draws on a sense of disaffection from the established political system and elites” (Sabatini and Farnsworth, 2006: 63, note 2).

2 The first use of the term “populist” to describe Thaksin in English appeared two days earlier in the Far Eastern Economic Review, but in an offhand way, expressing the view that the TRT election platform was not meant to be taken seriously: “In reality, stripped of its populist sheen, Thaksin’s government will be one of big money and big-business interests, reflecting its leader’s pedigree” (Crispin and Tasker, 2001). The Review did not regularly apply the adjective to Thaksin until one year later.

3 Large volumes of shares in the Shinawatra companies had been filed under the names of the family’s housekeeper, maid, driver and security guard, making them figure among the stock market’s largest shareholders.

4 “Village” here is an official territorial unit used in both urban and rural areas. The funds were available to both urban and rural communities.

5 The first drafts of this argument by Hewison appeared in early 2002, as did our similar analysis of the double-headed nature of Thaksin’s populism (Pasuk and Baker, 2002).

6 This can be seen by comparison of the vote for TRT in the February 2005 and April 2006 polls, before and after the At Samat event. Votes cast for TRT increased by 11.5% in Roi-et (and by 13.2% and 17.9% in the neighbouring provinces of Yasothon and Kalasin which were also peripherally involved in the event), while falling 8.6% nationwide. Our calculation using unofficial results for the 2006 poll (there are no official results as the poll was rescinded).

7 Thai industrialisation is also very much part of global production chains, with many manufactured goods assembled using imported parts and inputs produced elsewhere.

8 From 2003, the Thaksin government set rice procurement prices above the market price. The coup government estimated this policy had cost 101.76 billion baht (The Nation, 14 October 2006).


10 A graphic created by an anonymous academic and circulated in March 2006 purported to show a “Thaksin model” in which taxes levied on the middle class (25% of the population) paid for populist
policies lavished on the poor (70%) to keep Thaksin in power to boost the wealth of the rich (5%). It concluded, “The middle class has to support the whole country.” The graphic appeared in several newspapers including *The Nation*, 20 March 2006.

11 Anek initially argued that people are rational to support Thaksin’s populism, and should not be pictured as stupid and fooled (pp. 164-5). But later he compared populism to a mantra that can stupefy *(sakot)* people and to a whirlpool that can suck them down (pp. 166, 186); he dismissed TRT’s election victory as illegitimate because of the use of money (pp. 179, 182); and argued that people need education to “upgrade their needs” (pp. 167, 185, 189-91).

References


