

The Thai Coup d'état and Post-Authoritarian Southeast Asia

-The Shifting Balance of Social Powers-

This workshop considers the impact of the recent Coup d'état, which overthrew Thaksin's government and revived military rule, on the Thai society, and its implications for post-Authoritarian Southeast Asia and beyond.

After the civilians-inspired democratization in 1992, the Thai military had ceased to attempt a coup for fifteen years, during the period of which the size of the middle class significantly increased and its social power strengthened. The fact that a coup nevertheless took place, and the military, with the backing of the King, suspended the constitution in December 2006, invites us to reconsider the achievements and limits of democratization in general, and of the Thaksin's policies, the most recent and characteristically populist, in particular. It also raises a broader issue of the relationship between the military and democratization in Southeast Asia, as well as in developing countries in other parts of the world.

In this workshop we propose to discuss these issues in two ways. First, we wish to examine the nature of "populist" policies implemented by Takshin. His government carried out a variety of social policies targeting at urban lower classes and rural areas, including the introduction of the "30-baht medical care program", claiming a full access of medical care by everyone. As a result, Takshin succeeded in getting a strong political support in the countryside. At the same time, the middle class criticized his policies as "populist", and, by accusing his government of widespread corruption, cornered it to be brought down by the coup. Such a political turnout invites us to make a reassessment of populist policies and their implications for the shifting balance of social powers between the middle class and the rest of the population.

In fact this tendency for populism is widely observable across the political and economic divide in developing countries. While social policies have been actively pursued by the governments of Central and South America, led by social democrats and leftist parties, they are also being reinforced in emerging economies such as Malaysia. Moreover, populist policies have often been adopted, in tandem with the introduction of macroeconomic adjustment policies recommended by the IMF and the World Bank. Rampant rent-seeking activities are another common feature. Thus the Thai coup offers an opportune moment for capturing the rising tide of

populist governments in the developing world, and the role of social policies in the political structure of these governments.

Second, we propose to combine our focus on populism with the study of social movements, in order to understand the shifting balance of various social strata and its impact on national politics. In response to the Takshin policies toward the lower classes, some villages (muban) took interesting initiatives such as organizing cooperatives, in addition to committing themselves to the “one village, one product campaign”. What were the motivations of those farmers, and how did these initiatives turn out? How did workers and community organizations respond and what were the outcomes of their responses? While it is easy to observe the general trend towards democratic participation and decentralization, it is less clear if it has led to good governance in any identifiable ways.

Therefore, the relationships between the role of social movements and populism are another topic in need of comparative perspective. It will be important to refer to the East Asian experiences, by studying what happened to the initiatives by farmers, workers and community organizations when they were under the populist government, what happened to them after the populist government collapsed, and whether they made significant contributions to good governance.

This workshop is organized by the ongoing JSPS Core University Program led by the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, and Thammasat University. In particular, it mobilizes a number of researchers engaged in political, economic and social changes in East Asia under the leadership of Professor Pasuk Phongpaichit and Professor Kosuke Mizuno (Project 7), which includes a group of people specialized in social movements. It also involves a few researchers invited to study the Asian international economic order in historical perspective under the leadership of Professor Kaoru Sugihara (Project 9).