Social movements and political opposition in contemporary Thailand

Kengkij Kitirianglarp and Kevin Hewison

Abstract There is an underlying optimism in much of the literature that considers the emergence of social movements as being associated with deepening processes of democratization. The expansion of civil society is seen to expand political space. This paper takes a critical lens to this perspective, using recent political events in Thailand as a case study of the political strategies and alliances of social movements. We examine the debates that saw many social movements and their leaderships initially support elected Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his Thai Rak Thai Party only to see this support drain away as these same movements called on their followers to bring down the government. More importantly, we examine how these movements came to ally with conservative forces associated with the palace and military. Based on the Thai case study, we suggest that these seemingly unlikely outcomes result from the very nature of social movements. Leadership by middle-class activists, the need for alliances, the development of networks, and a focus on single issues and identities leads social movements to make substantial political compromises. The consequences can be negative for democratic development.

Keywords Social movements; democratization; monarchy; Thaksin Shinawatra; Thai Rak Thai Party.

While the emergence of social movements is dated to the eighteenth century, with marked expansion during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Tilly 2004), Thailand’s social movements are largely a phenomenon of the late twentieth century. Their emergence has generally been associated with

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deepening processes of democratization. This marks the period since 2005
as seemingly incongruous as the leadership of many non-governmental or-
ganizations (NGOs) and social movements sought to destroy elected gov-
ernments while supporting a military coup in 2006. Thailand’s recent polit-
ical experience raises important questions about the relationship between
social movements and democratization.

In this paper we examine the debates and political positions that saw
many social movements, and especially their leaderships, support Thaksin
Shinawatra who, as prime minister from 2001 to 2006, was Thailand’s most
popular elected politician, and his Thai Rak Thai (TRT) Party. This initial
support dissolved, and within months of the TRT’s landslide victory in the
2005 elections, these same leaders called on their followers to bring down
the government. In their campaign against TRT, there were calls for Thai-
land’s octogenarian king to throw out the elected government and appoint
a new administration. When this strategy failed, these activists threw their
support behind the junta that ousted Thaksin in a palace-supported military
coup on 19 September 2006 (see Hewison 2008; Connors 2008).

How was it that the leadership of social movements came to oppose a
popular and twice-elected government? More importantly, how was it that
they came to support the most conservative of Thailand’s political institu-
tions – the monarchy and military – more usually associated with authori-
tarian politics?

Conceptualizing social movements

‘Social movement’ is a concept that continues to evoke debate. Follow-
ing Oberschall (1997: 16) and Tarrow (1994: 4), social movements are a
collective response to challenges that negatively impact particular ways of
life. This collective response unites people with a common purpose and
has them involved in sustained interactions, opposing elites, the authori-
ties or other adversaries. In order to achieve their collective goals, social
movements will develop alliances with other social groups and with other
movements.

As Tilly (2004: 12) and others have noted, social movements are often
considered as emerging along with modern democratic forms of govern-
ment. However, this does not mean that all social movements necessar-
ily promote democratic principles or human rights and history demon-
strates that social movements can promote the interests of the rich or
of authoritarian elites (see Rodan 1996). Examples include Fascist move-
ments in Germany and Italy and contemporary anti-immigrant movements.
Some social movements can have strong links with the state or may be
organized to be supportive of the status quo (for a Thailand example,
see Bowie 1997). As we will show, there are also movements that can
be, at one moment, supportive of progressive or radical change while,
in another situation, may be entirely conservative. These complexities
and seeming contradictions lead us to emphasize empirical analysis in examining social movements and their political activism in contemporary Thailand.

While this paper cannot go into great detail regarding the various theoretical discussions of social movements, it is important to begin by considering the new social movements (NSM) literature. This literature focuses on excluded, marginalized or disenfranchised peoples, seeing them as developing new forms of political agency embedded in notions of identity. Movements associated with gender, sexuality, environmentalism and minorities are seen to have distinct interests that are identity-related and not reducible to any single shared identity. Both NSM theorists and activists identify state and civil society as separate and antagonistic entities (see Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 176–95). Civil society is conceptualized as an autonomous and potentially democratic space made up of many social groups. The state is often viewed as corrupted, authoritarian, elite-dominated and bureaucratic. The implication is that social movements, while working to change the state must remain suspicious of it, limiting the degree of co-optation (Bourdieu 2003: 43–4). Of course, in the real world of political struggles, co-operation with elements of the middle class, business, media and the state is common. As we shall see, this propensity for network politics can make for sometimes irreconcilable contradictions within NSMs and inside their networks.

In terms of strategy and tactics, NSMs tend to operate defensively, protecting specific communities, identities and interests. Hence, NSMs are not necessarily seeking parliamentary representation, demanding participation in state activities or fighting for state power (Touraine 2001). While this does not mean that all NSMs eschew these political aims, the politics of networking between movements is seen to replace party politics which are seen to be class-based. NSM networking is characterized as non-institutionalized and non-hierarchical whereas the state and party politics are seen as centralized and hierarchical (see Deleuze and Guattari 1983; Holloway 2005). This means that NSMs tend to emphasize direct democracy over representative politics. The latter is criticized for focusing on the ballot box and parliamentary politics and promoting centralization and state power while ignoring direct political participation by the ‘grassroots’ (see Rodan 1996: 13; Missingham 2003; Prapat 1998). Direct democracy is seen to challenge the dominating role of the state while expanding the political space for civil society.

In examining the Thai case, we accept this approach to NSMs as an accurate assessment of the ways in which NGOs and social movements have conceptualized their roles and managed their political activism. The propensity for alliances between NSMs and middle class interests, as well as with capitalist and conservative social forces, will be central to this paper. Social movements in Thailand have entered such political alliances on numerous issues. Our focus will be the role of NSMs and their leaders in the founding of the TRT, the collapse of this coalition, and the eventual alliance between
social movements, the anti-Thaksin coalition – known as the People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD) – and conservative forces associated with royalists and the military. We seek to show how these alliances led social movements into essentially anti-democratic political strategies and coalitions.

Social movements and the rise of the Thai Rak Thai Party

At the time of the 1997 economic crisis conflicts between the state and social movements increased significantly. As a result of the economic meltdown, thousands of companies closed, resulting in a doubling of unemployment to 1.48 million in 1997 and considerable industrial disputation (Supawan 2002: 57). The Democrat-led government adopted International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank supported schemes that had disastrous outcomes for the poor (see Hewison 2002), resulting in increased activism; in 2002, there were 1,219 protests against the government, double the number in 1996 (Praphat 2004: 134).

New organizations and movements emerged to oppose the government and IMF economic policies. This included a cross-class nationalist front joined by many NGOs (Hewison 2000). These groups founded their ideologies and built political strategies around a nationalist discourse constructed to oppose neo-liberal reforms that stressed ‘saving’ the country and its businesses from foreign control. An important element of this oppositional discourse was an emphasis on localism that drew extensively on communitarian ideas developed by NGOs. For example, NGOs and social movements came together to celebrate a ‘National Recovery Festival’ promoting self-reliant and self-sufficient development as an alternative to the government’s ‘Western’ developmental discourse (Pittaya 1998: 176–84). Related, in 2000, an alliance of intellectuals announced a strategy to protect Thailand’s ‘economic sovereignty and to eliminate dependence on foreigners’ (Wutiphong 2000). At about the same time, a ‘Neo-Nationalist Front’ of communitarians, NGO leaders and associated intellectuals and politicians was formed. According to Narong Petprasert (1999a, 1999b), this alliance was partially funded by capitalists associated with a campaign against the Democrat Party-led government and IMF, including the Thai National Business Club and the rising TRT Party.

Important in this alliance was a group known in Thailand as ‘Octobrists’. These were former student activists from the 1973–76 interlude of parliamentary politics. These activists have a particular significance for contemporary social movements and more broadly in Thai society. As student activists in the 1973–76 period, they campaigned against the military and authoritarianism, promoting an opening of political space. They exhibited a commitment to improving the lot of the poor, particularly in rural areas, support for unions, and promoted a political voice for the downtrodden. When the military returned to power following the violence of 6 October
1976, many of these activists escaped overseas or fled to the jungles and joined the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT). In the 1980s, as the CPT collapsed amidst ideological conflicts, they filtered back into the mainstream while often remaining committed to progressive change. These experiences provided the Octobrists with a collective identity and gained them the respect of intellectuals, NGO and social movement leaders, as well as political activists.

Strategically, these social movements developed temporary, loose, and single-issue networks that linked various interests, generally conforming to the model of NSMs. For example, the Assembly of the Poor (AOP), a network linking movements of small farmers, the landless, slum dwellers, fisherfolk, anti-dam protestors and others, represented 121 cases of conflict over natural resources, government projects and urban poverty without establishing a permanent and long-term organization (Prasittipon 2002). Organized labor, led by state enterprise unions, opposed the Democrat-led government and IMF policies, and entered into alliances with business leaders, state enterprise management, some senators and NGOs in a highly nationalistic anti-privatization campaign that drew considerable popular support, especially from those who wanted to prevent the sale of national assets to foreigners (see Brown and Hewison 2005: 362–3). In 1999, there were almost daily demonstrations against privatization led by the major public sector labor organization, the State Enterprise Relations Group (SERG) (Bundit 2001: 116–20).

An important element of these struggles is that they were not especially challenging to state power, the broad neo-liberal reform agenda or to established structures of economic power but were organized to seek political and policy concessions on a case-by-case basis or, in the case of unions, the single issue of anti-privatization. Politically, this approach demanded compromises and alliances.

Growing out of the crisis, TRT was registered in 1999, established by disgruntled capitalists, together with some of the Octobrists and NGO leaders (see Pasuk and Baker 2004: 64–9). The establishment of this political alliance had been an urgent task for domestic capitalists in response to the collapse of local businesses and emerging social conflicts. In establishing the TRT, the Octobrists were critical for mobilizing support from the leadership of NGOs and social movements (interview, Amara Pongsapich, 19 June 2007). Octobrists such as Prommin Lertsuriyadej, Phumtham Vejjayachai and Vakaraphan Chankajorn had connections with Thaksin, having worked for his Shin Corporation and with the Palang Dhamma Party, the party Thaksin led briefly in the mid-1990s (interview, Sutachai Yimprasert, 25 June 2007).

TRT’s 2001 election victory saw more Octobrists become members of the party. Some stood for election while others became TRT advisors. Jaturon Chaisang, who had been with the CPT, maintained links with northern NGOs, while Chamni Sakdiset linked TRT to former CPT members.
and NGO activists in the south. Surapong Subwonglee, a trained medical practitioner, became an advisor to Thaksin and invited activist physician Sanguan Nittayarampong to assist the party in the development of a universal healthcare policy (interview, Sutachai Yimprasert, 25 June 2007). Sanguan’s support attracted other NGO activists into the party. The Octobrists were a critical link to NGOs and social movements in the early period of TRT’s development, linking 40–50 activists to TRT policy formulation processes (Prapart Pintoptang, personal communication, 5 April 2007; interview, Sunee Chaiyaros, 11 October 2006).

In this period, TRT’s party and policy development involved both reformist and radical social movements.4 The leaders of reformist movements became directly involved with TRT. As party members, activists encouraged social movement activists to move closer to the party. Many were reformists linked with the Local Development Institute (LDI), an important source of communitarian and nationalist ideas and an organization that had long worked with government as a conduit for state-provided funding to local-level NGOs. LDI’s mentors included Prawase Wasi and Saneh Chammarik who had promoted communitarian and reformist approaches to local development (see Connors 2001). With key TRT figure Phumtham, the LDI helped to form local political networks and provided links to the TRT’s rongrian kanmuang (political school), adopting a previous NGO strategy for grassroots political mobilization that had also been used by the Palang Dhamma Party (McCargo 1998: 174; Corporate Thailand 2003: 59). These Octobrists were highly successful, and by early 2001, almost all of the NGOs associated with the major state-NGO co-ordinating organization, known as NGO-CORD, were supporting TRT (interview, Amara Pongsapich, 19 June 2007).

The links between TRT and these reformist NGOs were important for establishing a relationship between a party of capitalists and NGO activists and professional organizations (such as progressive physicians). At the same time, these linkages facilitated a connection between TRT and the masses in rural and urban areas, mediated by the middle class activists who led the NGOs and social movements. These relationships brought together business people, nationalists, communitarians, liberals and even royalists to support a capitalist political party that was seen as a ‘true friend’ of the poor and a promoter of nationalist-communitarian interests. This alliance of interests displayed a shared belief that TRT and Thaksin were nationalist, opposed to the neo-liberalism of the Democrat-led government and the IMF. Many rural development NGO leaders also considered that TRT policies, which they had had a role in formulating, were community empowering (see, for example, Seri 2001).

Radical social movements were more guarded in their support for TRT. These movements included the AOP, various labor groups and the Campaign for Popular Democracy (CPD). These groups had a history of mobilizing marginalized and exploited people to protest against various...
governments and their development policies. During the 1990s, they had continually criticized neo-liberal policies and attacked centralized state power. In the jingoistic atmosphere following the economic crisis, however, both AOP and SERG had readily accepted the nationalist alliance that opposed the Democrat government.

While the AOP had joined the nationalist alliance, it did not uncritically support TRT. However, on the day that TRT took power, Thaksin visited AOP protestors at Government House and promised to solve their problems. This action changed TRT’s image for many in the AOP, and it immediately accepted the new government’s request for the protesters to end their demonstration and return to their homes in the rural areas. Shortly after, the government made good on some of its promises (see Missingham 2003: 211).

Taking up the nationalist rhetoric during its anti-privatization campaigns, SERG equated privatization with an invasion by foreign capital. In campaign materials, SERG called on ‘National workers [to] unite to against global capitalism’. When TRT initially opposed privatization and implemented popular social welfare policies, it won the support of many unions and workers (see Brown and Hewison 2005). This support was symbolized by SERG leader Somsak Kosaisuk’s decision to have the 2001 May Day rally join a government-sponsored event rather than maintaining an independent labor event. Somsak argued that Thaksin deserved an opportunity to show his support for workers. Even so, Somsak’s decision caused a split between SERG and some more radical labor groups that opposed any alliance with the government, claiming that pro-Thaksin labor leaders were in the pay of TRT (interview, Sripai Nonsee, 1 July 2007; see Somsak 2004).

In the early days of the TRT government, even radical groups were generally optimistic about the relationship between the Octobrists and the TRT. For example, CPD leader Pipop Thongchai, while not uncritical of the Octobrists, argued that their inclusion meant the TRT would be different from previous political parties. He hoped that the Octobrists would influence the TRT government to work in the interests of the poor (see McCargo and Ukrist 2005: 98). Prominent slum activist Suvit Watnoo (2007: 335–6) went further, arguing that the Octobrists provided a ‘core group who can link, connect, and change the ideas of mainstream political parties [forcing them] to go beyond their narrow interests and the power game to be the beginning of political reform…’. He added that the Octobrists were ‘… the hope of the people’. The AOP considered that prominent TRT Octobrist Jaturon Chaisang was seen as a man with whom they could talk and deal (Missingham 2003: 210). However, the support from radicals was generally guarded. They remained suspicious of TRT economic policies, including plans for the eventual privatization of state enterprises (see Phumtham and Nopparat 2004: 52). Hence, during the 2001 election, they maintained some distance between themselves and TRT, maintaining
It seems clear that social movements, especially as represented by their leadership, did not oppose TRT even when some of the party’s policies appeared detrimental to the long-term interests of their constituents. Following the economic crisis, most of these movements built coalitions with capitalists and other elites in order to oppose the Democrat government and IMF neo-liberalism. Lacking a sharp critique of the conservatism inherent in elite nationalism and the communitarian ideology used by royalists and national capitalists, even radical groups were eventually to succumb to the lure of these discourses.

**Thai Rak Thai in power**

TRT took government with two major initiatives promised to the electorate. These were dubbed ‘Dual Track’ policies (Thaksin 2005; Pansak 2004). One set of policies targeted the poor, aiming to establish social safety nets and promote economic recovery, including universal healthcare, debt relief, village and community investment funds, a people’s bank, the promotion of entrepreneurial initiatives, asset capitalization and small and medium enterprise loans. Some of these schemes responded to long-standing demands by NGOs (Somchai 2006: 218–19) but also generated technocratic criticism (see Ammar 2002). Nevertheless, the government’s efforts were popular with the electorate and their timely post-election implementation saw TRT’s electoral popularity surge and its political future became intertwined with so-called populist policies. The second set of policies supported the recovery of businesses and individual capitalists, affording them some protection from foreign competition and providing ‘breathing space’ for enhancing their competitiveness (Hewison 2004). These policies proved popular with business and TRT retained substantial business support for most of its time in government.

Despite significant contradictions between these pro-business and pro-poor policies (Pye and Schaffar 2008: 40), TRT was engaged in a process to embed a new social contract that garnered the support of the poor, who were essential to electoral success (Hewison 2004). Following the Constitutional Court’s 2001 acquittal of Thaksin on electoral fraud charges (related to an earlier ministerial position he had held prior to the formation of TRT), the government became increasingly confident that it could stand without support from NGO leaders and associated intellectuals, and Thaksin was soon attacking NGOs.

As the economy recovered and domestic capital regained its strength, the government began to pursue privatization and free trade agreements (FTAs), policies social movements had long opposed as detrimental for the poor. Moreover, as the government became more authoritarian and political violence increased, rights groups alleged serious abuses. For example,
thousands were killed extrajudicially in the ‘War on Drugs’ (Human Rights Watch 2004). In addition, state actions against the southern Malay-Muslim separatist struggle saw 78 protesters die in custody in October 2004. More broadly, during the TRT’s period in government, at least 17 political activists were killed (see Chanchai 2006). The murder of environmental activist Charoen Wataksorn in June 2004 saw social movement leaders begin to consider the government a threat to social and environmental activists (Somchai 2006: 222).

Opposing Thaksin

The leadership of social movements considered such uses of the state’s coercive powers illegitimate, and the government’s failure to investigate or take action was seen as evidence of TRT arrogance. They believed that the government had failed to protect their interests and a political fight developed between the still hugely popular government and a range of activists. This opposition involved two related areas of discontent, summarized here as three discursive debates – nationalism versus neo-liberalism; community independence versus populism; and clean politics versus big money politics – and a struggle over political space.

Discursive debates

Nationalism versus neo-liberalism

Scholars, NGO leaders and others associated with social movements argued that the TRT’s return to neo-liberal economic policies showed that the government was pro-rich. Opponents particularly targeted privatization policies and FTAs, arguing that these had negative impacts for the poor and supported Thaksin business cronies. In response, the social movement-based opposition, both reformist and radical, adopted a nationalist rhetoric that was meant to contrast their approach with TRT’s neo-liberalism. Pittaya Wongkul, a CPD leader, accused the government of ‘Thaksino-Globalization’, arguing that Thaksin was a right-wing prime minister who was adopting neo-liberal policies to push the country towards a fuller engagement with global capital (Pittaya 2004: 9). Pittaya considered the business people associated with TRT, engaged in this transnationalist project, as not being true ‘national capitalists’. Reminiscent of dependency arguments about comprador capitalists, Pittaya chastised domestic capitalists who serviced transnational capitalists while asserting that national capitalism – especially that represented by medium and small scale business – was preferable to capitalist globalization. Thaksin and TRT were accused of being in cahoots with foreigners to exploit Thais and the nation (Pittaya 2004: 24). The way to oppose Thaksino-Globalization, Pittaya (2004: 9) asserted, was through a nationalist and
cross-class coalition:

our alternative to the harmful structure of the globalizing economy is that the groups of national capitalists, the real Thai capitalists . . . should ally in order to force the state to protect national capitalists and stop the harmful expansion of the transnational capitalism . . .

The nationalist shibboleth was also taken up by organized labor. The most powerful expression of this came during January 2004 demonstrations to oppose the privatization of the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand. Unions and social movements like AOP and CPD came together in a fight that emphasized opposing transnational capitalism as much as opposing privatization, as seen in their slogan: ‘Selling Water, Selling Electricity, Killing All Thais’. In other words, selling utilities to foreigners meant that all Thais would lose. As noted above, the labor movement had initially thrown its support behind TRT. However, TRT’s privatization plans caused its relationship with organized labor to crumble, with one SERG leader stating in 2004 that, ‘. . . from now on we will be an enemy of the Thai Rak Thai Party’ (cited in Pye and Schaffer 2008: 53). Labor’s nationalist message was especially loud during the 2005 May Day rallies where its slogan was: ‘Labor United Against Transnational Capitalism’ (cited in Bundit 2006: 34).

Nationalist discourses have long been a feature of Thailand’s political terrain. In the modern era, nationalism has been elemental for the social movement discourse (see Glassman et al. 2008). Beginning with an anti-Japanese goods campaign in 1972, an opposition to transnational capitalism has been evident, and royal photographs, national flags and nationalist slogans have been common to almost all political campaigns. With the shock of the 1997–98 economic crisis, nationalist discourses again came to the fore. In opposing Thaksin and TRT, nationalism was the critical element of the oppositional discourse, bringing social movements into alliances with jingoistic elements of the political right, including capitalists and a range of other conservatives who had long been identified as opponents of progressive change. As will be outlined, the logical outcome of social movement nationalist discourse was an alliance with the royalists and the other conservatives who promoted the 2006 coup.

Communitarianism versus populism

Beginning in the 1980s, NGOs had become the principal avenues for promoting pro-poor policies to various governments. Indeed, following the economic crisis, even while NGOs were opposed to the IMF bail-out conditionalities, they were identified as service deliverers. Under pressure from the World Bank, civil society organizations were targeted for delivering development assistance to the grassroots. Both the World Bank and NGO
leaders argued that the role of state agencies needed to be limited. In a coalescence of interests and despite an uneasy relationship between the two sides, the World Bank rejected an expanded state role bringing them into alliance with communitarian NGOs that saw the state as threatening the self-reliance of villages. However, the rise of TRT challenged this position by promoting state agencies and schemes for poverty eradication (see Jayasuriya and Hewison 2004). TRT demonstrated that top-down approaches could deliver services and rather than communitarian approaches, TRT offered a combination of state-initiated entrepreneurialism and state welfare.

Obviously, the TRT’s welfare approach was confronting for social movements. Some leaders felt that they could lose mass support as the state undercut their role and challenged their self-proclaimed position as champions of the poor. Indeed, some saw the state as draining the energy from movements, especially in rural areas. There were three elements to this challenge. First, it was clear from election results that the government’s policies targeting the rural poor were immensely popular, providing tangible benefits and constructing Thaksin and the TRT as friends of the poor. Second, while TRT policies addressed poverty, they did this without addressing the social inequalities that the more radical social movements considered essential to rural change. Third, in government, TRT was strategic in the way that it dealt with the rural poor. Instead of dealing with broad issues of rural development and inequality, the government sought to address individual problems – as represented by a long-standing struggle and a social movement – and attempted to ameliorate each problem while simultaneously diluting the political issues involved. The result of the challenges was that the influence of social movements was reduced (Uchain 2006: 160–2).

As the government successively resolved single-issue problems, there was a drop in the interest in broader, structural issues such as land reform, FTAs and privatization. At the same time, the longer-term struggles that had been critical for the movements seemed to diminish in significance. As a result, these movements were unable to continue to mobilize large numbers of supporters for their actions. For example, prior to the rise of TRT, the AOP could often rally 10,000 and more. However, by December 2001, there were just 300 people involved in an AOP-organized protest in Bangkok (Missingham 2003: 211).

It became evident that many of the single-issue social movements were being out-maneuvered by the government and that they lacked the political skills required to oppose TRT. For example, Kanokrat’s (2003) study of the anti-Pak Mun Dam movement (a sub-group of the AOP network) concluded that the movement displayed little capacity for linking their particular issue to broader structural problems such as economic liberalization, inequality or neo-liberal economic policies. At the same time, the TRT's issue-by-issue approach and its pro-poor economic policies were often acceptable for the grassroots membership of single-issue movements.
It was noticeable that social movement activists failed to mobilize their supporters around issues and problems that went beyond immediate concerns. The inevitable result was that the AOP and other rural-based movements compromised with the government and accepted short-term gains (Kanokrat 2003: 246). Where movements remained oppositional they tended to exhibit an uncritical acceptance of communitarianism.

As opposition to TRT increased, communitarianism became a convenient element of the critique of TRT’s policies. By 2004, many of those activists who had initially supported TRT’s policies as empowering and enhancing rural development had come to see TRT policies as throwing money into communities without resolving poverty, while ‘destroying the community’s wisdom’ (Banchong 2003: 62–3). The AOP’s Somkiat Pongpaiboon (2004: 200) claimed that government policies were meant ‘to make villagers consumers’, identifying these policies as ‘the violence that liberal capitalism does to the villagers. . . . It finally leads the villagers to become weak and unable to stand on their own feet.’ These critics wanted rural communities to be strengthened through localist strategies that rejected the market, consumerism, materialism, urbanism and industrialism (see Hewison 2000). This approach had an affinity with the king’s conservative rural development approach called the ‘sufficiency economy’, and thus brought social movements into alliance with the palace in opposing Thaksin and TRT populism.

While TRT’s ‘populist’ policies were unlikely to address inequality and power, the government did seek to address various problems that had bedeviled rural communities for decades in terms of health care, debt and production. Communitarian ideas, while having some localized successes, were remarkably unresponsive to the poor’s broader needs and demands. Those involved with social movements recognized this and understood that the communitarian vision was perceived by the rural masses as too idealistic and less grounded than the TRT’s pro-poor policies (personal communication, Amara Pongsapich, 15 July 2008). Even so, the communitarian approach provided a political platform for social movements to align with other social forces in opposing TRT.

Clean politics versus big money politics

Pasuk and Baker (2002: 13) characterize Thaksin’s rise as a ‘logical extension’ of Thailand’s ‘money politics’, while noting a remarkable change in scale that saw money politics replaced by truly ‘big money politics’. The money politics discourse and the related issue of corruption was placed on the agenda for scholars and NGO activists following collections edited by economist and senator Chirmsak Pintong (2004) that highlighted corruption, cronyism and collusion under the Thaksin government. According to Thongchai (2008: 24), these concerns drew on a ‘clean politics’ discourse that first emerged in the 1980s, and associated with royalists. This
discourse was especially widespread among the ‘urban middle class who claim to be champions of democracy and whose views are presented by the mass media’ and aimed ‘to promote morals and ethics in every sector of the society’ (Thongchai 2008: 25). Thongchai concludes that this approach evidenced four assumptions. First, politicians are corrupt; second, politicians get power by vote-buying; third, elections do not equal democracy; and fourth, democracy should mean moral and ethical rule. These assumptions cast a particularly negative light on rural voters as vote sellers and the perpetrators of money politics (see Anek 2007).

Reformists NGOs soon aligned themselves with royalists in turning against Thaksin because of allegations of corruption in opposing a system that the royalist Prawase Wasi (2006: 118) described as a new era where big capitalists had seized political power. NGO-aligned reformists joined a growing chorus accusing TRT of intensifying money politics. Mirroring royalist critiques, CPD leaders Pipop (2004: 204–5) and Suriyasai (2004b) emphasized ‘conflicts of interest’, ‘corruption’, ‘money politics’, and the ‘patron–client system’. These terms were also utilized by a range of liberals (see Chirmsak 2004; Thirayuth 2004; Anek 2007) who all found common cause with Prawase’s (2006: 130) call for a ‘Civilized Capitalism’ which advocated a ‘politics of citizenship which is the process of strengthening society, of peace-making, of wisdom, of socialization, of morality and respect for the constitution.’

Despite years of grassroots organizing and implementing village-level projects, social movement leaders identified the rural poor as the central problem of money politics, being seen to be easily bought by politicians or fell for the short-term or fake benefits offered by TRT. The deeper assumption of this argument was that rural people lacked the political and democratic consciousness necessary for liberal democratic politics. This perspective suggested a broad failure of community organizing and activism over several decades. While such assumptions have been shown to be largely misplaced, the clean government discourse brought social movements, liberals and royalists together to oppose the big money politics they associated with Thaksin and TRT.

These three interconnected discourses, dominated by nationalism and communitarianism, lacked intellectual coherence but permitted labor and social movements to align themselves with the forces of the political right: the palace and military. In the past, such conservative forces had used xenophobic discourses to demobilize and restrict democratic development. Social movements initially supported TRT when it too adopted nationalist shibboleths, only to abandon the party, labeling it as authoritarian and neoliberal, and adopted the ‘clean politics’ discourse to oppose TRT. Such critiques were not entirely unreasonable, but as Pye and Schaffer (2008: 45) conclude, ‘Thaksin’s support was real because his rural and pro-poor policies were real too’. This support was seen in the enormous electoral support TRT received. Significantly, the political alternatives proposed by social
movements were seldom as concrete as those proposed by TRT and were less responsive to the poor’s material demands. Given their long history of rural activism and political advocacy it is surprising that the leadership of social movements showed so little understanding of the rural political economy and were unable to develop ideas that appealed to the material interests of their constituents. The result was social movements that were weaker and less able to mobilize grassroots support while the TRT was able to make enormous electoral gains by appealing to the same grassroots constituency.

**Evolving political strategies**

As already observed, by 2004, political space had narrowed under TRT. This led to a reconsideration of social movement political strategies. As early as the end of 2001 some activists agreed that NGOs and social movements would be harmed if TRT remained in power, but their responses to this realization indicated the weakness of reformist movements. Two political stances emerged. First, the power of TRT led some activists to abandon broader struggles and concentrate on the local-level. Second, activists associated with the LDI believed that they could negotiate a relationship with the government, seeking benefits for NGOs and their constituents. NGO-CORD and the CPD decided to continue supporting TRT while remaining suspicious of the party (interview, Amara Pongsapich, 19 June 2007). Essentially, the reformists had no clear-cut political position and were prepared to work with the government especially as the support of the Octobrists was considered an opportunity too good to miss.

The radical position was more complicated. Many acknowledged their political weakness vis-a-vis TRT, but did not make major changes to their strategies. Rural movements continued to operate as a loose and fragmented political network built around different issues and groups. This strategy was essentially reactive to the events of national politics. For these groups, the main issue prior to each election was the question of which party was likely to be a better listener and ‘friend’ to the poor (see Bundit 2006: 15). However, as the relationship with TRT deteriorated, direct action was also undertaken. For example, when Thaksin reneged on his promise to resolve all the AOP’s issues, the Assembly launched protests in Bangkok in December 2001 and in Bangkok, Chiangmai and Ubon Ratchathani in March 2002 (Missingham 2003: 212). These were followed by protests by the Assembly of Small Scale Farmers (ASSF) in April 2002 and against a gas pipeline in Songkhla in December 2002. While the government dealt with the ASSF, it took repressive action against anti-pipeline protesters and the AOP, and the protests ceased (Somchai 2006: 200–21).

For labor, the struggles against privatization were powerful and effective. However, these highly focused actions failed to challenge the government’s broader neo-liberal agenda. The anti-privatization movement was
a loose and temporary network of unionists, NGO activists, social movements, public intellectuals, and a range of middle class consumer and media organizations. Once the government retreated on privatization, the movement began to dissolve. FTA Watch, set up in 2003 to oppose trade agreements, had a similar loose and temporary network and once negotiations on the proposed Thai–US FTA were abandoned in early 2006, the network was much diminished.

By early 2005, farmers’ groups including the Small-Scale Farmers’ Assembly of Isan and other social movements agreed to end their relationship with TRT. This led to a proposal for a new political party for the poor. However, most NGO leaders remained silent on this idea (interview, Suvit Watnoo, 20 April 2006), while some opposed it (Somchai 2006: 223). The long-discussed idea of building a labor party also re-emerged during the TRT’s tenure, and meetings were held and a party founded, but with no further action.

After the 2005 election

The changes to social movement political strategies became clear during the 2005 election campaign, when two closely related approaches were adopted: tactical voting and support for a newly-formed Mahachon Party (see below for details on the party).

Tactical voting

In late 2004, intellectuals and grassroots activists in Thailand’s North began a campaign for NGOs and social movements to oppose TRT. The campaign involved a voting strategy that acknowledged a parliamentary means to oppose TRT. The activists called for voters to cast their ballots against TRT, hoping that this would provide more strength for the parliamentary opposition. The strategy was to ‘restore a balance of power in parliament, making TRT more open and less authoritarian while also making the checks-and-balances system workable’ (Somchai 2004: 15). Organizations such as the CPD and LDI adopted this parliamentary means to challenge TRT.

In the 2005 election, the CPD advocated voting for either the Democrat Party or for the new Mahachon Party, a breakaway from the Democrats (Pittaya 2005: 4). Poldej Pinprateep (2004) from LDI argued that support for Mahachon was a way to challenge TRT while representatives of state enterprise unions concluded that the ‘Mahachon Party’s labor policies are the best’ (Bundit 2006: 15). In late 2004, the CPD, NGO-CORD and other activists founded the PAD, tasked with campaigning against TRT during the election (see Somkiat 2007: 142). The goal was to ‘propose an electoral strategy to build a balance of power with the Thaksin regime and to propose a plan of political reform . . . by collecting issues from networks of
people and decreasing the political power of the Thaksin regime’ (Suriyasai 2004a).

Ideologically, these reformists further developed the nationalist and ‘clean politics’ discourses linked with the king’s ideas about the ‘sufficiency economy’. This link was meant to contrast TRT’s alleged abuse of power with the king’s superior moral power. Prawase was particularly influential, arguing that ‘Thailand’s alternative [to] the domination of money politics is the sufficiency economy that the ...king ...has given us.’ He dubbed this the ‘Rattanakosin Strategy’ asserting that it rested on ‘people’s power and the power of wisdom.’ Linking this with voting against TRT, Prawase (2004: 15) continued,

we need tactical voting where the people know who they will vote for. It depends on people’s decisions between the ‘Rattanakosin Strategy’, which leads to a peaceful country and [the] ‘Moneyism’ [of Thaksin and TRT] which would bring about a catastrophe for the country.

Moreover, Sulak Sivarak (2003), a respected conservative intellectual with close NGO ties, asserted that TRT was not only harmful to the people but a threat to the monarchy and its interests, suggesting that Thaksin’s ‘moneyism’ negatively affected the king’s Crown Property Bureau. Later, Sulak (2004) added that opponents needed to mobilize nationalists who loved the king to fight Thaksin; this was a significant statement as Sulak, while a royalist, had previously been critical of the reigning monarch (see Anon. 1993).

This approach failed completely in electoral terms as TRT won a landslide victory. However, these elements of the anti-TRT discourse – royalism, the sufficiency economy, alleged threats that Thaksin posed to the king’s wealth and power and TRT’s lack of morality (contrasted with the king’s moral purity) – were adopted by activists who would play crucial roles in the anti-Thaksin demonstrations from late 2005.

Support for the Mahachon Party

A variant on this strategy was to support a particular political party. Lacking their own permanent political organization and a coherent, alternative, vision for political change, a large number of activists became members or advisers of the Mahachon Party (interview, ex-Mahachon spokesman, Apichart Thongyou, 15 June 2007). The contradictions of this strategy were clear, especially as the party seemed to be dominated by and financially dependent on conservative politicians and locally-powerful ‘godfathers’. Party leader Anek Laothamatas (2005) acknowledged that activists had to compromise in order to align with a party funded by ‘dinosaur’ politicians. Those who made the necessary compromises, including activists from
NGO-CORD, played important roles in formulating policy and campaigning for the party (Terdtham 2006: 137).

Mahachon proposed ‘Third Way’ politics for Thailand with policies that were neither royalist, neo-liberal nor populist (interview, Apichart Thongyou, 15 June 2007). As Callinicos (2001) points out, Third Way politics is essentially a strategy that promises no fundamental transformation of society and preserves the interests of the rich while offering the poor limited social welfare. The activists who threw their weight behind Mahachon accepted this reformist vision.

Like tactical voting, the strategy of supporting Mahachon failed in the 2005 elections and Mahachon managed just one parliamentary representative. Most significantly, the defeat of both social movement strategies was perceived by some activists as a failure of parliamentary politics and saw them proclaiming extra-parliamentary political activism as ‘true democratic politics’.

**The People’s Alliance for Democracy**

The PAD that had been founded by the CPD was dissolved after the 2005 election, but was re-established in February 2006 following the controversial sale of the Shinawatra family’s Shin Corp (Ukrist 2008: 133–5). This reincarnated PAD joined with media magnate, self-proclaimed royalist and former Thaksin supporter Sondhi Limthongkul who was already campaigning against the government. PAD’s central committee, drawn from 22 social movements, was led by Sondhi Limthongkul, maverick Buddhist politician Chamlong Srimuang, Pipop Thongchai from the CPD, Somsak Kosaisuk of SERG and former AOP advisor Somkiat Pongpaiboon. PAD spearheaded rallies and marches opposing Thaksin and TRT, mobilizing crowds ranging from several thousand to more than 100,000.

The sale of Shin Corp to Singapore’s state firm Temasek, prompted Sondhi to claim that a national asset was being sold to foreigners and led to calls from PAD to ‘Save the Nation’. Sondhi said that PAD was defending both the nation and the monarchy, proclaiming, ‘We fight for the King’ against Thaksin and TRT (Pittaya 2006: 4). These claims linked with other anti-TRT issues related to corruption and neo-liberalism through a constant comparison made between the moral authority of the monarchy and Thaksin’s greed. To understand the role of PAD, it is necessary to consider the political nature of PAD and PAD’s anti-Thaksin discourse.

**PAD’s politics**

PAD represented an alliance of two social forces, brought together to oust Thaksin and TRT. The first was a group of royalists drawn largely from the middle classes and the elite and led by Sondhi. The second was a grouping of activists, NGO leaders and trade unionists.
(Suriyasai 2006: 354; interview, Suvit Watnoo, 20 April 2006). For the activists, allying with Sondhi’s royalists was the logical conclusion to the drawn-out strategic shift that began with nationalist campaigns following the economic crisis. By late 2005, these activists had abandoned parliamentary-based opposition as they allied with conservatives. This coalition was funded by businesspeople like Sondhi, the industrialist Prachai Leophairatana and elements close to the palace-linked individuals (see Kam-noon Sittisamarn 2006; Kate 2007). The involvement of activists in 2005 was highly significant for PAD for it allowed it to avoid being perceived as a movement of disgruntled members of the elite. PAD drew much of its support from Bangkok’s middle classes rather than the poor or the political grassroots in the provinces. This was emblematic of a strategic political shift that was neither a political accident nor a well-considered political decision; rather, it resulted from the failure of these activists and the leadership of social movements to develop alternative political agendas that appealed to the grassroots.

This shift on the part of the leadership of social movements saw them drawn to PAD’s nationalism, communitarianism and ‘clean politics’ agenda. Without its own mass base, PAD needed the support of social movement leaders to overcome the potential negative perception associated with opportunistic leadership and crusty elite support. PAD necessarily incorporated social movement discourses and initially included some of the demands made by social movements (Pye and Schaffer 2008).

However, within PAD, the social activists were politically fragmented, paid insufficient attention to tactical and ideological debates and lacked the capacity to articulate a strategic vision. The result was that these activists ceded leadership of PAD to the conservatives led by Sonthi (interview, Suvit Watnoo, 20 April 2006). Moreover, because the activists were increasingly alienated from their grassroots base, they came to depend on Sondhi’s supporters (Supalak 2006: 178). These shortcomings meant that the activists lacked negotiating power within PAD and they came to support an essentially royalist, conservative and middle class political agenda. This was emphasized in the debates that erupted within PAD over the use of Article 7 of the 1997 Constitution.

Calling for royal intervention

In mid-March 2006, as TRT seemed to withstand PAD’s protests, a frustrated PAD leadership called for the use of Article 7 to oust Thaksin. This article of the constitution stated, ‘Whenever no provision under this Constitution is applicable to any case, it shall be decided in accordance with the constitutional practice in the democratic regime of government with the King as Head of the State’ (cited in Connors 2008: 148). PAD’s leaders saw this as an opportunity to call for direct royal action to remove the government, replace it with a temporary administration, make constitutional
changes and hold a new election (Connors 2008: 159). Following the April 2006 election which opposition parties boycotted, King Bhumibol interceded, declaring that PAD’s call for the use Article 7 was inappropriate while agreeing that Thailand faced a ‘political crisis’ as parliament remained inquorate and unable to meet and he urged judges to ‘find a way to solve the problem’. Providing succor for the anti-TRT protestors, the king added, ‘This is not a democracy’ (Bhumibol 2006). Senior judges heeded the king’s call and annulled the April elections and ordered new polls while jailing the country’s election commissioners for malfeasance (Vander Meer 2006).

Not all activists associated with PAD accepted the call for royal intervention and the debate that developed is instructive in showing how ill-conceived political compromise and opportunism underpinned the anti-Thaksin opposition. The groups that did not want to invoke Article 7 included unionists, the Student’s Federation of Thailand, and some from CPD and FTA Watch. Some activists broke from PAD over this royalist strategy. However, this opposition was short-lived because no alternative strategy was promoted, meaning that the royalist tactic prevailed.

Those who stayed with PAD, including many from NGO-CORD, LDI and some CPD leaders, explained that the call for royal intervention against an elected government was a ‘necessary evil’ (Suriyasai 2006: 347) or made a case for it being a legal and constitutional procedure. They portrayed Thaksin as an enemy, arguing that the king, allied with ‘the people’, was a democratic force in society (interview, NGO leader Srisuwan Khuankachon, 1 April 2006). The CPD’s Pipop (interview, 7 May 2006) claimed that the use of this provision was legitimate in a political dead-lock, adding that the ‘use of the Article must be in accordance with the democratic regime with the monarchy as the head of the state’.8 Further demonstrating the acceptance of royalist arguments, it can be noted that it was the CPD’s Pittaya (2006: 4) who first claimed that TRT allegedly had a plan – the Finland Plot – to overthrow the monarchy. This alleged plot was critical in empowering royalists and their attacks on the government that PAD spearheaded, painting Thaksin and TRT as republicans.

According to Thongchai (2008: 27), this royalist discourse ‘undermine[d] electoral legitimacy and …helped to open the door for non-democratic intervention.’ In other words, the activists who joined with PAD accepted political tactics that led directly to the palace-inspired military coup in September 2006 (Thongchai 2008: 30; Hewison 2008). In this sense, the activists became willing allies with the most conservative forces in Thai society.

Conclusion

While our discussion of the political role of social movements in Thailand’s recent political imbroglio concludes with the palace-backed military coup that threw out Thaksin and TRT in September 2006, the political debate has continued since then.
After more than a year of military-backed government, the promulgation of a new constitution meant to limit political parties and control politicians, a TRT proxy party, the People’s Power Party (PPP) – TRT having been deregistered by the military-appointed government following the coup – gained government in the 2007 elections. By May 2008, PAD was back on the streets to oppose another elected government that they considered illegitimate. The organization, now firmly controlled by Chamlong and Sondhi, but still backed by some unionists and leaders of social movements, sought to bring down the government led by Thaksin loyalists. While activist support was more limited, the alliance remained united by discourses of nationalism and royalism. This time, however, PAD and its supporters also indicated a rejection of electoral processes.

Arguing that rural voters could not be trusted, were politically immature or ignorant, PAD advocated limiting representative democracy through appointing members of parliament or organizing elections through functional group representation. Under this proposal, as many as 70 per cent of representatives were to be appointed (Macan-Markar 2008). PAD opposed the elected government at every turn and armed its supporters against the government and political opponents, leading to street clashes, deaths and several injuries. In December 2008, as PAD occupied Bangkok’s airports, the Constitutional Court dissolved the PPP. The military and conservative forces then engineered a Democrat Party-led coalition government, thus securing PAD’s objective of ousting the pro-Thaksin government.

Our analysis of the politics of Thailand’s social movements – as examples of new social movements – and their alliance with some of the country’s most conservative political forces raises significant theoretical and practical issues. As we have shown, NSM theory tends not to consider the possibility that social movements, because they ignore the struggle for hegemony, may have to depend ideologically on conservative and undemocratic elites. The tendency for NSMs to ally with elites, bureaucrats, business and middle classes in order to empower their movements indicates a failure to adequately conceptualize class politics.

While we noted above that social movements are not solely defined by their political positions, it is evident that Thailand’s social movements have portrayed themselves as progressive or democratic in their politics. It is also clear that most commentators and analysts have viewed Thailand’s social movements in this same light. At the same time, opposition to a government led by a party that, despite being the largest party in parliament, was considered illegitimate by many activists can be easily justified as definitional for social movements. In this case, however, we have documented a process that saw social movements making alliances with the monarchy and the military, both forces that have been associated with conservative and authoritarian politics in Thailand. More recently, elements of social movements, aligned with PAD, have called for a decidedly undemocratic form of
politics to replace the parliamentary version of democracy that has emerged in Thailand.

Our conclusion is that this turn of events and political positions can be understood as resulting from the very nature of new social movements. Because of the singularity of each social movement struggle, there is no need for social movements to analyze the underlying economic and political structures of society as a whole. Because they tend to reduce political struggles to everyday struggles responding to the state, they are unable to challenge the root causes of social inequality. In order to achieve their limited objectives, social movements develop network arrangements that result in political coalitions with a broad range of other groups and parties, with limited consideration of the strategic and political issues involved.

To adequately understand social conflict and the relationship between state and civil society, it is necessary to explore the intricate connections between economic, political and ideological structures. It is also necessary to understand how it is that some classes are exploited and how others are excluded from political and economic power. This analysis of classes suggests that while there are identities and struggles over gender, race, environment and so on, these are encapsulated within the conflicts over the production and distribution within capitalist society (Wright 1989: 89–90).

The reliance of social movements on political networks and rejection of the state raises important issues regarding political strategy. Contrary to the basic assumptions of many social movements, the state is not merely corrupted, authoritarian, elite-dominated and bureaucratic and nor is civil society simply an autonomous and potentially democratic space made up of many social groups. Rather than simplistic and mechanistic suspicion of the state and undifferentiated celebration of civil society, both sectors need to be conceptualized as contradictory, contested, relational and overlapping. As Poulantzas (1980: 129) observed, ‘the State is not purely and simply a relationship, or the condensation of a relationship; it is the specific material condensation of a relationship of forces among classes and class fractions.’ Likewise, civil society is full of contradictory relationships, alliances and struggles, between and within various classes (see Gramsci 1971: 4).

In these contexts, political parties of the oppressed are important for both extra-parliamentary organization and for organizing struggles on the state’s terrain. As a political organization, a party can link with multiple struggles and connect the various issues of the dominated classes (see Bensaid 2007: 148–62; Giles 2003: 289–318). Moreover, a party produces organic intellectuals. Without a strong organization mobilizing and producing its own intellectuals, social movements inevitably accept the ideological domination of the ruling classes and fractions of those classes. The loose, informal and specific networks of social movements result in fragmented struggles which produce inherently contradictory alliances between
social movements and the middle class, capitalists and conservative forces.

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**Notes**

1 In this paper, when we refer to social movements and NGOs we are generally referring to the leadership of these organizations. We acknowledge differences between NGOs and social movements, but tend to take the two together as the leaders of the two often speak and act in similar ways.

2 Communitarians advocate rural self-reliance and self-sufficiency which reduces market reliance and builds a strong community and a strong nation. This approach builds on Buddhist notions of moderation and the rejection of greed. Communitarians view self-sufficient and small-scale agriculture and Buddhism as the bedrock of Thai culture and values. The Thai village is seen to be a true ‘community’ marked by solidarity, equality, popular wisdom, environmental concern, and so on and opposed to markets, consumerism, materialism, urbanism and industrialism (see Hewison 2000).

3 All interviews were conducted in Bangkok between 1 April 2006 and 1 July 2007.

4 For this paper, we refer to a reformist social movement as one which aims to bring about progressive changes that are in the interests of the people the movement claims to work for without threatening the state or the class interests of the ruling class. A radical social movement is one that claims to be working for fundamental changes in society that transform political and economic power.

5 ‘Community wisdom’ is a phrase associated with NGO communitarianism and is suggestive of self-reliance in that all ideas for development are available in the village. See Hewison (1993) and Rigg (1991) and the references cited therein.

6 Somchai (2003, 2008) has shown that rural voters in the northeast region have used their electoral power in bargaining for reforms from the government. Likewise, Walker (2008) demonstrates that simplistic assumptions about vote-buying do not hold in the north. He argues that rural voters are ‘linked in multiple ways with local figures on all sides of political contests. There is no ready-made social basis for political mobilization into clearly defined electoral entourages’ (2008: 102). In other words, far from being manipulated or bought, in the electoral system, rural voters had some negotiating power; a fact TRT appeared to recognize.

7 Officially, the ‘sufficiency economy’ is a ‘philosophy that stresses the middle path as an overriding principle for appropriate conduct by the populace at all levels. This applies to ... families, communities, ... [and] nation ...’. Further, ‘sufficiency’ means ‘moderation, reasonableness, and the need [for] self-immunity ... from impact[s] arising from internal and external changes ... [I]t is essential to strengthen the moral fibre of the nation ...’. In addition, ‘patience, perseverance, diligence, wisdom and prudence [are] indispensable to ... cope ... with critical
challenges arising from … socioeconomic, environmental, and cultural changes’ (NESDB 2006: 2).

8 The reference to a ‘democratic regime with the king as head of state’ was increasingly used by conservatives at this time and was a part of the name of the junta that came to power following the September 2006 coup.

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