CHAPTER V

INCREMENTAL GROWTH OF DEMOCRATISATION PROCESS
IN THAILAND AND THE ROLE OF STUDENTS

Thailand maintained its independence at a time when colonialism and western imperialism was at its height in Southeast Asia. Since Thailand kept its independence intact, its traditional structure, particularly the monarchy, the Buddhist Sangha (Monastic Order), and the military and civil bureaucracy were also intact. Thailand, therefore, neither was benefitted from the process of democratisation through the transfer of colonial institution, nor did it suffer the kind of destruction of social fabric that many European colonies in the Third World experienced. Thai political system had relied on the monarchy for its legitimacy. The monarch reigned and ruled was the focus for loyalty, love respect, and religious faith of the Buddhist populace.1

In Europe capitalist development gave rise to the bourgeoisie who found that the pre-existing monarchical regime stood in the way of their achieving economic power. The bourgeoisie thus turned to democracy as

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a alternative regime. However, there is no universal theory on the basis of which the democratization process can be explained, it depends upon the social, political and economic condition of a particular country where one is trying to trace the genesis of democratic movements.

Democratization process in Thailand has to be viewed in a long continuum and developed in an incremental fashion. Unlike European society where emergence of bourgeoisie and middle class led to the rise of democracy, the process in Thailand was initiated long time back when enlightened King Rama IV introduced western education and abolished outdated customs and beliefs. This process was further strengthened by the King Rama V, Chulalongkorn the Great, who started various reform programmes in 1892. In the process number of changes took place in areas such as administration, fiscal policy, legal system, military organization and abolition of carve and slavery systems.

It was the King Chulalongkorn who laid the foundation of democracy in real sense. He considered elections as an integral part of democracy and ordered the first ever election of judges. He granted religious freedom to his subjects, elevated the status of women and gave right to submit an appeal to the King. He advocated equality before law.

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and initiated the printing of civil services news in the Royal Gazette. Development of legal system during his reign was another important work in laying foundation for democracy.

During reign of Chulalongkorn, Council of the Councilors on National Affairs and the Privy Council came into existence. Judicial system and as well as regional administrative system had undergone major changes. For the promotion of democracy, the Local Administrative Act of 1897 was promulgated to use as a guideline for regional administration in provinces, districts and villages. The King took initiative in giving villagers a chance to elect village headman and at the same time women were also given right to vote. By abolishing slavery and making education available to all the people he granted freedom and equality to his subjects.⁴

A group of people from royal and noble families submitted an appeal to the King Chulalongkorn to introduce a legislative assembly along the lines of western democracy but King rejected their demand due to presence of Western powers in the region who were looking for a chance to exploit the Asian countries weakness and also the fact that the majority of the people had very little understanding of democracy.⁵

⁴ Democracy in Thailand, Published by Armed Forces Information Supreme Commander Headquarters (Bangkok, 1998), p.5.
⁵ Likhit Dhiravegin, op.cit., n.3, pp.102-103.
The King Rama VI also realized the fact that Thailand was not yet prepared to have parliamentary system, because the majority of the people had very little understanding about democracy. He, therefore, passed a bill of compulsory Primary Education Act to have education and to develop an understanding of democracy among masses. He understood the role of press in a democratic society and granted freedom to the press but at the same time he himself wrote an article cautioning the people to use their own wisdom before believing any news that appeared in a newspaper. To experiment with democracy, he built a toy model town in his compound of Dusit Palace and named it "Dusit Thani". The designated owners of all the toy-houses participated in administration of the municipality. The town was divided into districts subdistricts and villages according to characteristic of local administration. There were toy houses, toy temples and toy government houses with designated officials in different sections. The constitution of this toy-model town gave its supposed citizen the right to select their leader from the two available parties - the Red Ribbon and the Blue Ribbon - and the party with majority of votes would form a government. To make the administration of toy model town more realistic, there were parliament, a forum for debate, discussion and criticising, and a newspaper which he named "Dusit Mitr". This experiment of the King
Rama VI shows his vision on democracy which he thought, would lead to gradual democratization of the country.\(^6\)

King Rama VII, Prajadhipok, realised the necessity of modernisation of Thai administration. He started training the officials for self-governing at local level in the form of municipality. In fact a constitution was drafted by Raymon B. Stevens, adviser to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Phraya Srivisarnwaja, Minister of Foreign Affairs, which was to be granted to Thai people on the occasion of 150th anniversary of the founding of Bangkok on April 6, 1932 but the proposal faced strong objection from the members of royal family on the ground that timing was not appropriate because Thai people were not yet prepared to be ruled by constitution.\(^7\) Therefore, the overthrow of absolute monarchy in 1932 in Thailand is nowadays portrayed not as a defeat for the monarchy but as a part of historical process of democratization started by various Kings of Chakari dynasty. And King Prajadhipok is credited with having presided over Thailand's historical transformation from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy.\(^8\)

However, during the reign of King Prajadhipok Thailand because of internal and external economic problems led to the accumulation of

\(^6\) Democracy in Thailand, op.cit., n.4, pp.5-6.
\(^7\) Ibid., p.7.
social discontents. Between 1929 and 1931 there was 60 per cent fall in
the farm price of rice. In some rural areas, consumption expenditure by
peasants, along with wages paid to farm labourers, fell by 50 per cent. A
flood of rural petitions complaining about the economic effects of the
recession and demanding reduction in taxes, was received by the
government, urban wages also fell by 20 per cent between 1931 and
1932. As government revenue fell, due to falling foreign trade and the
world currency crisis, the King was forced to announce widespread
wage cuts in the civil service and army and new series of taxes fell
heavily on salaried employees. This increased discontent among some
section of the Thai population.  

First democratic process, in real sense, was started by the
students when a coup was staged by a group of military and civil
officials on June 24, 1932. They invited King to rule under the
constitution which he accepted. The core group was formed among
young civilian and the military officials who were studying in Paris in
mid 1920s. In October 1926 Pridi Banomyong and Prayoon Parmon-
montri, both of whom were studying in France, founded the Peoples
Party in order to plan the overthrow of the absolute monarchy. The first
meeting of the Peoples Party was held in February 1927 in Paris. Initially

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the group consisted of seven, and the ten or so recruited soon after which included military officers attending elite European military academies, and those young civilian officers who were sent abroad to acquire specific professional and technical skills. The founding members drew up a manifesto of aims which consisted defence of national independence, maintenance of law and order, government promotion of an economic plan to provide work for all and prevent hunger and poverty, equal rights for all citizens, and finally to provide full education for the people.¹⁰

The democratic movement which emerged in the late 1920s and succeeded in overthrowing the absolute monarchy in 1932 became broader. Although it started among a small group of dissident officers, it drew in more established members of civil and military bureaucracy, economic nationalist businessmen, intellectuals and organised labour. It attracted the support of new emerging urban Thai society which felt excluded by the old structure of royal rule.

It is ironical that soon after the succession of the western educated elites, military and civil bureaucrats, in their seizer of power from the monarchy, constitutional idealism gradually eroded into formalistic constitutionalism. From 1932 to 1945 the only formal political

¹⁰ Ibid., p.47.
institution in Thailand was unicameral legislature composed of two categories of members - half elected and half appointed. The Peoples Party did not find it necessary to transform itself into a political party since its leading members and supporters were already appointed members of the National Assembly. Political parties, therefore, emerged as late as 1946 and were recognised as legal entities nine year later in 1955. What was institutionalised instead was the political role of the bureaucratic elites. The new leadership relied upon the bureaucracy to play a leading role in educating and mobilizing the masses to participate in the elections, as well as to learn about democracy through the symbol of constitution. From the beginning of the constitution rule, the role of the elected members of parliament was oriented towards internal legislative activities rather than to act as a major political institution for participation and competition for major positions of government power. Hence the electoral process in Thailand, which began in 1933, did not lead to the recruitment of political leadership at the top. It was only a tool to legitimise the political system and process in which competition for power was not linked with the electorate but the factions in the military.\footnote{Chai-Anan Samudavanija, \textit{op.cit.}, n.1, p.308.}
Political parties were not allowed to function in the first fifteen years of constitutional rule, and voting method in the first election was indirect - each village was elected its representative; the village representatives choose those of the districts, who in turn chose the representatives of the province. Political participation was a mobilized action in which officials of Interior Ministry at a village and district levels played a significant role. Hence early universal suffrage in Thailand did not lead to a meaningful political participation or the emergence of political organization, as happened in other societies. And moreover universal suffrage was given to the people when they were not familiar with the principles and the working of new system. It was not surprising, therefore, that the constitutional rule was finally replaced by an authoritarian military rule - first by Field Marshal Phibun Songkorn and later on by Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat and Thanom Kittikachorn respectively.

After the replacement of traditional monarchy, Thailand's initial experiment with democracy proved failure due to civilian divisiveness. As a result the military stepped in to fill the vacuum. The army provided order and security but at the cost of freedom. Martial law and repression in the form of harassment of opposition members became frequent. Although constitutional democracy was restored on few occasions and
free play was given to the formation of political parties, the political groups, those who participated in elections, were little more than the personal followers of the politicians in the capital. Therefore these parties were unable to discipline themselves and did not cooperate with each other on a common platform. As a result army remained in power for more than six decades, legitimizing their rule by occasional elections and promulgation of constitution.

The kind of rule which existed in Thailand for more than six years was described as 'PrachaPathipatai' i.e. democracy. For Thai people any system other than absolute monarchy was democracy. Whether under martial law or an elected parliament, they called it democracy. To most of the Thais also PrachaPathipatai did not mean popular sovereignty, control by elected representatives over the executive branch. Political legitimacy, for them, comes down from monarchy and bureaucracy to the common citizen, not form an elected government which represents popular will of its people.12

A nation can be described as a democratic nation in which the citizens participate in choosing government leaders; candidates for elective offices compete against one another; and government's recognition of citizen's civil and political liberties. This definition comes

mostly from the western scholars and philosophers of democracy which can be universally acceptable to all the nations because degree of civil liberties varies from nation to nation. Thai democracy have some characteristics of liberal democracy, such as free and fair elections, but these elements have been modified sufficiently to suit their tradition. Hence Thai democracy can be called western democracy with Asian tradition because many Thais define democracy in terms of individual freedom, but simultaneously they support military coup leaders who seized state power and abolished constitutional guarantees of elections and freedom of speech and assembly. Clark D. Neher and many other academicians have defined Prachathipatai as semidemocracy, the best suited word for Thai democracy.

After the change in administration of the country from absolute monarchy to democracy in 1932, political leaders who were prime movers behind the change tried to set up a political party in order to maintain political power for themselves and their group. In fact, it was an association rather than a party known as Samokon Khanaret - Association of people. Though they did not use the word "party" and registered it as an association, the form of gathering was similar to a

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14 Ibid., pp.302-303.
political party. The main motive behind the formation of this association was to pursue political activities by bringing people together with the same belief in order to change the country's administrative system and to gain control of the administration thereafter. However, leaders of the association tried to justify their move by saying that the idea of a political party was quite new to the Thai people and most of them lack in knowledge and understanding in party system.

The elections and constitutions have been integral part of Thai democracy since monarchy became constitutional in 1932. The first election of the members of the House of Representative was held on November 15, 1933. This election was an indirect election, the people elected their representative who would later on elect members of parliament. There was one representative from each province. Provinces with population more than 200,000 were entitled to have one extra representative for every additional 200,000 people. There were altogether 78 representatives throughout the country, making a total 156 members of the House of Representatives when combined with 78 Royally appointed members. Second election of member of parliament took place on November 7, 1937 since the term of the first group of representatives was to expire on December 9, 1937. The election was different from the first one, in that, the people could directly elect their representatives,
making for the first time a direct election in Thailand. But the Parliament was dissolved and election was held again on 12 November, 1938 as government lost the votes on a motion to modify a budget bill.\textsuperscript{15} During the period between 1932 to 1938, there were eight cabinets and two prime ministers.

After the election of 1938 Field Marshal Phibun Songkorn became the 3rd prime minister of Thailand. Phibun's cabinet from 1938 to 1944 marked the high point of rule by the army. During this period, there were seven cabinets with an average of 51 per cent military men in the cabinets. Also in the same period, the yearly average of the percentage of military expenditure to total national spending increased to 33 per cent, compared with 26 per cent during the 1933-1937 period. With the rise to power of Phibun, heroism and ultranationalism, with emphasis on leadership, began to develop. Such developments finally led to militarization, especially before the outbreak of World War II. In 1942 the government amended the constitution to extend the tenure of the parliament for two years, and in 1944 the tenure was extended for another two years.

Although Phibun's rise to power did not in any way affected the constitution, his leadership style and ultranationalistic policies greatly

\textsuperscript{15} Democracy in Thailand, op.cit., n.4, p.61.
affected civil liberties. The state assumed its role in remoulding the values and behaviour of citizens by imposing several orders, rules and regulations. The nationalist drive also resulted in a number of discriminatory policies against the Chinese minority community. There was no challenge to the government's policies as being unconstitutional, either by parliament or by the press. This reflected the weakness of values and inherently autocratic traits in Thai society, which were utilized to a great extent by Phibun and his principal political adviser.16

Before the outbreak of World War II the Phibun government was mainly controlled by members of the 1932 junior clique, including Pridi Banomyong - a prominent civilian leader who was the chief ideologist of the 1932 coup group. World War II brought about a major conflict between Phibun and Pridi. The former chose to ally with the Japanese and the Axis powers, the later identified himself with the Allied powers. When Thailand declared war against the Allied powers Pridi formed an underground movement against Japanese and the Axis powers. The defeat of Japanese and the Axis Powers resulted in the collapse of Phibun's military government.

After the World War II, politics in Thailand was largely a matter of struggle among three groups for dominance. First one was the military

16 Chai-Anan Samudavanija, op.cit., n.1, p.309.
group that supported Phibun Songkorn and was based mainly in the army. The second group, mostly the supporters of Pridi Bomomyong, was rooted in parliament and civil services. The Third group, considerably smaller, was traditionalist and royalist in character. This group was led by Khuang Aphaiwong and Seni Promoj.¹⁷

Defeat of the Japanese and Axis powers led to the resignation of Phibun from post of prime ministership in July 1945. The National Assembly began to play a dominant role in the Thai political system for the first time. Political parties were formed in late 1945 and early 1946. A new constitution was drafted and promulgated to replace the 1932 constitution in May 1946. The new constitution was an attempt by contemporary civilian coalition of Pridi and Khuang to establish new institutional arrangements to minimize the power of the military. The constitution provided a bicameral legislature - the House of Representatives, to be elected directly and Senate to be elected indirectly by the House of Representatives. The election was held on August 5, 1946 and a civilian dominated government was formed. However, politics during this civilian dominated period was highly unstable. From August 1945 to November 1947 there were eight cabinets and five different prime ministers. Competition among civilian

politicians, together with charges of corruption, economic hardship as a result of the war and the mysterious death of King Ananda, led to a military coup in November 1947. The coup group abolished the 1946 constitution and replaced it with an interim constitution. The election took place in January 1948 in which Democratic Party won the majority and Khuang Aphaiwang became the prime minister. But after less than two months of his premiership Khuang was forced to resign by the army, and Field Marshal Phibun Songkorn once again became the prime minister in April 1948. 18

In his second tenure, Phibun tried to consolidate his position by patronage and intermarriages among Thailand’s leading military and bureaucratic families. There were informal ties between political power holders and wealthy local Chinese. Phibun and some other military officers and bureaucrats got place in the board of directors of Chinese run enterprises. To consolidate his position, Phibun staged another coup in November 1951 and replaced the existing constitution by the original constitution of 1932 which enabled him to appoint half of the seat in the National Assembly. After a trip to Europe and USA, Phibun restored free speeches, allowed the formation of political parties announced that new election would be held in February 1957. Phibun’s party won the

18 Chai-Anan Samudavaniya, op.cit., n.1, p.310.
majority of seats in the National Assembly, but discontent with frauds led to the mass demonstrations. It was the first time after 1932 coup, general public and student went for the demonstration against political misconduct. Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat who was “city peace keeper” used this opportunity to seize power and a caretaker government was formed under the premiership of Pote Sarasin, the former Thai Ambassador to the USA. A general election was held in December 1957 in which no party won a majority in the parliament. Lieutenant General Thanom Kittikachorn, a leading member of the coup group, was chosen as the prime minister in January 1958. However, as a result of the inability of the government to control the internal strife within its supported party as well as deteriorating economic conditions, Sarit staged another coup in 1958. This time he abrogated the constitution, dissolved the parliament, banned political parties, arrested several politicians, journalists, writers and labour leaders, declared martial law, and imposed censorship on newspapers. In 1959, an interim constitution was promulgated which gave tremendous power to the prime minister. Therefore his rule has been characterised as a dictatorship, as a benevolent despotism, and as military rule. His rule marked beginning of new political system in Thailand which was Thai in its character. Apart

19 David Wilson, op.cit., n.17, pp.32-33.
20 Chai-Anan Samudavanija, op.cit., n.1, p.312.
from his strong anti-communist policy, his initiation of a National
development plan opened the way for the tremendous developmental
activities of the following decades. The most significant change Sarit
brought to the Thai political system was the activation of the role of the
monarchy in to Thai politics.

General Thanorn Kittikachorn succeeded Sarit, after his death in
1963, and became prime minister and commander of the army. In 1968 a
new constitution was promulgated after ten years of drafting. Two years
after promulgation of constitution, conflict within ruling coalition led
another coup in November 1971. After the coup Narang Kittikachorn, the
prime minister's son and Deputy Prime Minister Praphat's son-in-law,
emerged as a new strong man. Narang was seen as a heir apparent to
the prime ministership. This kind of dynastic succession was never
before seen in the Thai military, which generated tremendous discontent
and criticism from the general public.

Four decades of army dominance led to the emergence of new
social and political groups in Thai society. By early 1970s, the capitalists
began to have a large say in economic policy making. Although they
were in close collaboration with the military before the 1973 uprising,
they did not fall from grace alone with the military. On the contrary, they
became politically more independent and assertive. While rapid
industrialization brought together an alliance between the state and the capitalists, at the same time it gave rise to new social formation, the most significant of which was the middle class. With the emergence of the middle class came more credible political movement. It was this emergence of the middle class that led to a drastic change in the Thai political landscape since 1970s. The middle class based its political activism on populist measures and extensive mass mobilization.21

One of the most important development of his period was emergence of student activism. Most of the youngsters who entered the education system during the industrialization period of the 1960s and 1970s were men from the underprivileged class. Being underdogs, they tended to be more receptive to any political ideology which advocated equality and the promotion of rights. Democracy as an ideology served this purpose well. The political activism of these educated youth were also based on their material needs, that is, some of them were frustrated by the fact that the country's industrialization could not deliver them employment upon their graduation. Others became vulnerable to propaganda against capitalism, including the one which advocated socialism.22

22 Ibid., p.47.
In such atmosphere where there were no tradition of democratic politics in the western sense of parliamentary party politics as political parties in Thailand were quite weak the student became the focal point of all opposition. The youth, frustrated due to unemployment and angered by the army's attempt to curb their freedom, the students became the champion of people's cause. The students had been quite active since the formation of National Student Centre of Thailand (NSCT) in 1969. They organized several demonstrations on various social and political issues. In 1973, even before the uprising, they had frequent discussion and symposium on drafting a new constitution. The students in collaboration with the university Professors and intellectuals aimed at promoting new democratic constitution. In this task they were supported by the press and general public. An additional factor in their favour was the cracks that were appearing up in army rank as it was later apparent from General Kris Sivara's refusal to massacre the unarmed students during the revolt. At the same time capitalist class also wanted to get rid of the dictatorship which had become too corrupt and ineffective.23

On 6 October 1973 student leaders and political activist were arrested while they were distributing leaflets demanding immediate

promulgation of a new constitution. The government announced that the police had uncovered a communist plot to overthrow the administration. From 6 October to 13 October 1973 hundreds of thousand of students and their sympathisers gathered to support the cause of the jailed students and political activists. Although government agreed to release the students and promised to quicken the drafting of the new constitution, riot police on the morning of 14 October clashed with a group of demonstrators and hundreds of students were killed in front of royal palace. As a result violence spread in the whole city. However, General Kris Sivara, army commander in Chief, adapted a position independent from the Thanom-Praphat group and refused to massacre the unarmed students. Finally the King intervened and told Thanom, Praphat and Narang to leave the country.\textsuperscript{24} He appointed Professor Sanya Thammasare, former chief justice of supreme court and rector of Thammasat University as the prime minister of the new care taker government. Professor Sanya promised a new constitution within three months and his cabinet was dominated by civilians in which there were only two senior army officials.

The Student Revolt of October 1973 brought back once again the period of open politics and democratic experiment. A new constitution

was promulgated in 1974 which was based on 1949 constitution. It limited the number of senators to only 100, with less power than the elected House of Representatives. The government officials elected to the Senate had to resign their bureaucratic posts; votes of no confidence remained the sole prerogative of the House of Representatives, and the prime minister had to be a member of the House of Representatives. These provisions set the stage for a more open political system based on party and pressure group politics.

From 1974 to 1976 the political climate in Thailand became highly volatile. Pressure politics, mobilization, polarization, and confrontation replaced the usual political acquiescence and achievement of consensus through bargaining between patron - client factions. The students, labour unions and farmers groups were most active in expressing their grievances and making demands, which led them into conflict with government officials, business interest groups and landowners.

During 1970s, there were large number of political parties in Thailand. These parties were resembling clubs and parties of individual representation. Several factional groups were formed, each composed of members of earlier government parties. Fragmentation and political

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polarization of both Left and Right characterised Thai politics during this period. The Democrat Party, Thailand's oldest, was divided into three competing factions; each formed its own political party to contest in the 1975 elections. The members of defunct government party were also split into several competing groups, which subsequently led to the formation of four identical parties, namely, the Thai Nation Party, the Social Nationalist Party, the Social Justice Party, the Social Agrarian Party. These parties were linked with the business community and the military-bureaucratic factions. Apart from these parties, some other parties were Social Action Party, New Force Party, United Socialist Front and the Socialist Party of Thailand.

In 1975 elections, forty two parties contested but only twenty two won seats in the House. The Democrat Party, which had won 72 seats out of 269, formed a ninety-one-seat minority government in February 1975, but the House on 6 March voted no confidence in the newly formed government. The Social Action Party under the leadership of Kukrit Pramoj, with only eighteen seats in the House, together with three major parties and ten minor parities, formed a new coalition government. However, this government had a built-in instability because of lack of trust among leaders of the various parties. Each party, aware of the possible dissolution of the House at any moment, focussed on building
its own small empire. On 12 January 1975 - two days before the Democratic Party's schedule vote of a no confidence motion - Kukrit dissolved the parliament. In the April 1976 election four major parties - the Democrat, Thai Nation, Social Justice and Social Action - emerged as a dominant powers, compared with the multiplicity of small parties in the House elected fifteen months earlier.

The Democrat Party's leader, Seni Pramjo (brother of Kukrit Pramoj) headed the new coalition government comprising the Democrat, Thai Nation, Social Justice and Social Nationalist Parties. Together these four parties controlled 206 of the 279 seats in the House of Representatives. However, due in large measure to the weak and vacillating leadership of its aging head, the Democratic Party had by 1976 becoming divided into two sharply opposing factions, one oppressive and the other conservative. The conservative faction, in alliance with the rightist parties, ultrarightist groups, and the military, attacked the progressive faction as being leftist and communist. The factionalism and the weakness of civilian leadership coincided with the growth of leftists ideology and political polarization.27 In the meantime came the fall of South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia to communists. Hence, when a crisis occurred in October 1976 following Field Marshal

Thanom's return to Bangkok, the weak and faction ridden government was unable to control the violent and chaotic situation.

As a result Thai society experienced its worst on October 6, 1976 when political violence took place in Thailand and followers of left ideology were attacked by rightists and army. In this political violence, hundreds of people were killed and more than three thousand students fled to the forest and joined communist insurgent forces in remote areas of the country. This incident once again brought back the military into Thai politics. After this bloody coup, the government was headed by a former supreme court judge, Thanin Kraivixien, and his dictatorship was more horrifying than the military government.28

Thanin's anticommunist zeal brought about rigorous indoctrination of civil servant, repressive educational control, pressure on labour unions, severe press censorship, and rigid foreign policy. The military leaders, especially the emerging "Young Turks"29 in the army, became convinced that Thanin was leading the country to disaster. On 20 October 1977 the Thanin government was overthrown by the same group that brought Thanin to power one year earlier. The coup group

28 Likhit Dhiravegin, op.cit., n.3, p.106.
29 Young Turks - The young army officers of the 1960s, underwent the new five year course pattern after the American 'West Point Model'. They decided to form a secret movement and called themselves "Khana Taharn Num" (Young Military Officers' Group) and became popular as 'Young Turks'.

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eased social conflict and political tension by abolishing the 1977 constitution and replacing it with a more liberal one. A bicameral legislative with an elected lower House was again introduced. However, the new military regime, like its predecessor, maintained its control over the legislature through the appointed senate to ensure political stability.

After the election of 1979, General Kriengsak formed a new government. He adapted a liberal policy towards the problem of communism by granting amnesty to the students and others those were arrested in the 6 October, 1976 incident as well as those who had fled to the forest to join the CPT. In 1980 Kriengsak was forced to resign and General Prem Tinsulanonda became the new prime minister. A year later, an attempt was made by the "Young Turks" to overthrow General Prem's government but they failed because of their inability to get the tacit approval and support of the King, who openly supported Prem. The "Young Turks" power and influence thus ended abruptly.30

The period between 1980-1988 is considered to be the most significant period in post 1973 Thai political history. The Prem era was probably the first time since 1973 when parliamentary politics was relatively stable. Against the backdrop of the 1976 coup, followed by the 1978 constitution which retained a strong military presence in politics,

the Prem era was viewed as redemocratization of Thai politics. This period has been characterised by many scholars as "semi-democracy" because the military continued to play a strong political role within the parliamentary framework.\textsuperscript{31}

Prem's advantage as a military strongman enabled him to exert control over the capitalist class, civilian politicians, and civil society. He formed an alliance with a group of technocrats, and a group of capitalist to resolve the economic crisis in the early 1980s. The formation of Joint Public-Private Committee (JPCC) for economic policy making under the Chairmanship of Prem himself was one important political manifestation of this alliance. The JPCC was the first of its kind where capitalists and technocrats converged on development programmes under strong political leadership. The alliance contributed significantly to Thailand's economic boom and international competitiveness in the 1980s.

However, Prem's alliance was not without challenges. In fact, the most serious challenge to Prem came from the vary people who put him in power earlier on. They were young military officers, led by Colonel Manoon Rupkachorn, who became disenchanted with Prem, whose political actions and policy programmes were seen as too accommodative to capitalists and disadvantageous to the

\textsuperscript{31} Suren Maisrikrod, \textit{op.cit.,} n.21, p.152.
underprivileged in the provinces. The influential group of officers began to desert Prem and moved against him in the form of two coups in 1981 and 1985, but he survived both the times. He was successful in crushing the coup because his alliance, based on the support of the state apparatus and the capitalists, was far too strong for any group to challenge him. And by aligning with the monarchy, the symbol and the source of bureaucratic legitimacy, Prem could reap political benefits more than anyone else.

Two general elections called by Prem in March 1983 and May 1988 produced two significant results: more political space and a much weakened position for his coalition. The middle class became more politically powerful as a result of the wider political space and the growth of the economy, largely the result of Prem's fiscal stabilization and export promotion policies. However, the alliance group and middle class realised that instead of consolidating democracy, Prem was establishing "bureaucratic-authoritarianism". And the middle class movement started against what they perceived to the Prem's dictatorial tendency. During the July 1988 elections Prem was more or less politically discredited. He stepped down in August 1988, following a
petition by a group of academicians to the King to reject his premiership in case he was nominated again.\textsuperscript{32}

The most significant political legacy left by Prem was probably the phenomenal expansion of the middle class. The members of the middle class were young - in their thirties - well educated, and politically conscious and experienced. Despite their relative affluence, they were quite idealistic. A large number of these people were student during 1970s, and had direct experience with the advent of the post-1973 democratisation. The political sensitivities of the middle class were not only based on their social and professional advancement, but also on their sense of political conscience, reminiscent of their days during 1970s, at the height of student activism.

The growing confidence of the middle class was also due to their independence of government employment. In the 1960s and the early 1970s, one common expectation among those who enrolled for higher education was to join the government service. But from the late 1970s, the trend changed because of both the over-sized state bureaucracy and the better opportunities outside it. An increasing number of students in the 1980s found it more rewarding to join business corporations or became entrepreneurs themselves.

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., p.159.
The independence of this class from the state also occurred at another level, i.e., many of this class people were from the provinces who had come to attend universities in Bangkok. When they were in the provinces, they were exposed to feudalistics-authoritarian characteristic of the state apparatus, particularly the military, police force and other agencies under the Ministry of Interior. While in Bangkok Universities, they were exposed to new ideas and new thinking, often instilling in them of resentment against provincial authorities. After graduation most of them remained in Bangkok, effectively freeing themselves from the subjugation of bureaucratic control, very different from the situation of their parents in the provinces. Democracy was the most logical tool for them to sustain their opposition against state power during their student days. And, they continued to have this rebellious spirit even when they were well-entrenched in the capitalists system. So, once they detected Prem's movement towards tighter control, they decided to resist the regime by forming an alliance with progressive forces, such as intellectuals, to call for Prem to step down.

After July 1988 elections, Chatichai Choonhavan became Thailand's first elected prime minister in twelve years. The urban educated middle class, professional executives, academics, and

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33 Ibid., p.160.
independent media heralded the event as major step towards full fledged democracy. The Chatichai government, therefore, when it assumed office enjoyed considerable legitimacy. Moreover, the Thai economy continued to register impressive double-digit growth rates. After two years, on 23 February 1991, Army Commander-in-Chief, Suchinda Kraprayoon seized the power in a bloodless coup. The constitution was suspended, National Assembly was dissolved and Martial law was imposed. General Suchinda appointed Anand Panyarachun, a respected civilian, as a prime minister. The Chatichai governments claim that it had a popular mandate, was largely rejected on the ground of the alleged vote-buying practices in the previous election. The group which supported two years back Suchinda also responded quite favourably to the coup in February 1991 because from their perspective "the measure of good government was not only economic performance but also integrity and honesty, and one can not substitute for the other." 34

Although parliament was dissolved and martial law was imposed, the coup leaders allowed a considerable degree of political and economic liberalism. Political parties were not banned, press freedom remained largely untouched, and public criticism was tolerated.

However, within a few months the sincerity of the coup group began to be questioned. It became obvious that the military leaders sought to perpetuate their political control through a new constitution that would pave the way for military officers to assume the highest political office. Because of the highly internationalized character of the Thai economy, the word’s reaction was now a major consideration. After the coup European Community issued a statement expressing regret at the demise of the democratic government. The United States suspended $16.4 million of economic and military aid. The business community and professional middle class held the military responsible for the economic downturn, believing that the coup had inevitably led to a serious decline in international trade, investment, and tourism on the one hand and mounting hardship in international trade negotiations on the other. Therefore, the Business community and the middle class understood that, amidst the worldwide democratisation trend, any military takeover was bound to be ostracized by western democracies.³⁵

On March 22, 1992, general election was held but no single party got the majority of seats. A coalition government was formed with the help of five pro-military parties and General Suchinda Kraprayoon became the prime minister. General Suchinda broke his promise of 18

³⁵ Ibid., p.23.
November 1991 of not to become the prime minister. Suchinda was seen as perpetuating the power of the National Peace Keeping Committee (NPKC), confirming the fears of the group which had been organising themselves over the previous year.

A massive anti-military demonstration took place in Bangkok in May 1992. Unlike the anti-military demonstration of October 1973, which was dominated by the students, this time people participated from all walks of life. Suchinda underestimated the power of general public and resorted to violence in which around 100 people died in Bangkok and some of the provinces. He stayed in office of the prime minister only for 48 days and finally submitted his resignation. The demonstrators achieved this victory mainly due to support from King Bhumibol Adulyadej and modern technology, (copiers, fax machines, e-mail and cellular phones), which kept the demonstrators aware of their progress in spite of the government's censorship of the press.36

General Suchinda underestimated the power of the ideal of democracy among the country's increasing sophisticated and educated urban citizens. He did not understand that the 1991 coup did not undo two decades of new participatory values. He also did not understand that Thais were embarrassed that their country had suffered another

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coup at the time when world was moving towards more open and liberal regimes. Those who participated in May demonstrations, most of them were students during 1970s and had experienced the post 1973 democratic period. However, during the first period of democratisation students were left alone but this time opposition group was more organised and well equipped to face the challenges. Therefore they were in a position achieve their goal.

The May 1992 event and its outcome has been described by many scholars as an end of military dominance and beginning of democratisation of Thai politics. After the resignation of General Suchinda Kraprayoon King appointed Anand Panyarachun as the prime minister of the caretaker government. During June and July 1992 Anand introduced measures to curb the political power of the armed forces, reduced military control of state enterprises, and removed the authority of the armed forces to intervene in the situation of social unrest. Anand re-organised the armed forces by demoting some of the army officers and placed them to inactive posts. The new Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces, General Wimol Wongwanit, pledged that the army would not interfere in politics during his period of command.37

The general election took place on 13 September 1992, when 12 political parties contested for 360 seats in the House of representatives in which 62.1 per cent electorate voted. The Democrats won largest number of seats (79) while Chart Thai and Chart Pattana secured 77 and 60 seats respectively. The Democrat Party was able to form a coalition government with the help of New Aspiration Party, Palang Dharma, Social Action Party and Solidarity Party. Chuan Leekpai, leader of Democratic Party, became the prime minister of the new coalition government. Chuan was the first prime minister of Thailand who came from common background and had no experience in the military or bureaucracy. He declared his intention to eradicate corrupt practices, to decentralize government, to enhance rural development and to reduce the power of the Senate.

With the formation of Chuan Leekpai's coalition government, six decades' of army dominance in the political arena of Thailand, came to an end. Thai political system has changes in the last six decades as new institutions have arisen and co-opted many of the traditional prerogatives of the country's Patro-Client groupings. Political parties, a parliament, non-governmental organisations, and myriad interest groups all played new roles formerly carried out by patron-client entourage. Moreover as middle class has grown, as education has reached all
sections of Thai society, as more than 90 percent citizens have become literate, and as media has found its way to virtually every village and town dwellers through newspaper, radio and television, Thais have become far more sophisticated about politics than in the past. The traditional values of "knowing one's place" and respect for authority are being replaced by modern equalitarian values.\textsuperscript{38}

Thailand has moved towards democracy as people are enjoying the liberty of speech, expression of ideas and free press which are backbone of democracy in any country. There are, however, some negative impacts of these changes on Thai democracy as the emerging new dominant groups, particularly in rural areas, are intensively indulging in vote buying activities. Since the civil society and political institutions have already developed and many of the distortions of democracy have been corrected, that will lead Thailand towards a more stable democracy. The history of western democracy has also taken the path of turmoil and tension and ultimately setting down to a more stable democracy. Thailand is also moving towards that direction.