CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Modern democracy, as a concept, originated in the western countries and gradually spread over throughout the world. The transition from various forms of governance, such as monarchy, authoritarian rule, army rule etc., to modern democracy was never smooth. Democracy is not a sudden process rather it is incremental and before it took final shape, the countries have gone through various steps to achieve the modern form of the most popular method of governance. Modern democracy means a form of governing system which is by the people, for the people and of the people. It is obvious therefore that the "people", their financial status that is their affluence, their participation and their consciousness are the prime importance for the success of democracy.

As far Thai democracy is concerned, it has also gone through incremental process and striving towards maturity in course of time. Democratisation process in Thailand has been started in the late nineteenth century itself by its enlightened monarchs when most of the Third World countries were being ruled either by despotic monarchs or by the western colonial powers. Unlike the European monarchs, who were
either thrown out by a revolution or were forced to rule under the constitution, Thai kings themselves took the initiative and started social and political reforms. King Mankut was the first Thai King to start social and political reforms when he introduced western education and abolished the outdated customs and beliefs.

King Chulalongkorn the Great initiated the process towards democratization by bringing out reforms in various areas such as administration, fiscal policy, the legal system, military organisation and abolition of slavery system. He formally laid the foundation of democracy in Thailand when he ordered for the election of judges as he considered elections as an integral part of democracy. To make democracy successful, he granted religious freedom, elevated the status of women, gave right to appeal to king, advocated equality before law and highlighted the role of press in a democratic society by giving the permission to print civil services news in Royal Gazette. To make people aware of democratic norms, he gave order for the election of village headmen and also granted voting right to the women. However King Rama VI realized that Thailand was not yet prepared to have parliamentary democracy, because the majority of the people had very little understanding of democracy. He, therefore, passed a bill of Compulsory Primary Education to educate and develop an
understanding of democracy among masses. He granted freedom to the press and himself wrote an article cautioning his subjects to use their own wisdom before believing any news that appeared in a newspaper. He went one step further ahead and built a toy model town in his palace compound to experiment with democracy. This experiment of Rama VI shows his vision on democracy which he thought would lead to gradual democratization of Thailand.

The King Rama VII, Prajadhipok, started training his official for self-governing at local level in the form of municipality and even a constitution was also drafted by his adviser and foreign minister but could not be implemented because he faced strong objection from the members of royal family on the ground that Thai people were not yet prepared to be ruled by the constitution. Therefore when monarchy became constitutional in 1932, there was a general belief that it was not the defeat for monarchy rather a part of incremental process of democratization started by various Thai kings.

Students played most crucial role in the making of modern democratic Thailand. First democratic process, in real sense, was started by the students when coup was staged by a group of military and civil officials on June 24, 1932. They invited the king to rule under the constitution which he accepted. Most of the officers who were
involved in overthrowing the absolute monarchy made the conspiracy in Paris where they were studying. Their manifesto very clearly showed their aims and vision of future Thailand. Their main concern was not to grab power but to develop Thailand into a modern democratic nation.

The democratic movement, which was started by the students studying abroad and succeeded in overthrowing the absolute monarchy in 1932 became broader. Although it was started by a small group of people, it drew in more established members of civil and military bureaucracy, economic nationalist businessmen, intellectuals and organised labour. It also attracted the support of new emerging Thai society which felt excluded by the old structure of royal rule.

It is ironical that soon after the success of the coup, constitutional idealism gradually eroded into a formalistic constitutionalism and political elites did not find it to reform Thai feudal society into a civil society which is considered to be one of the most important component for success of democracy. Peoples Association which formed the government after the coup did not find necessary to transform their Association into a political party since its leading members and supporters were already appointed members of the National Assembly. 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 a learn about the democracy through the symbol of constitution. Hence electoral process in Thailand did not lead to the recruitment of political leadership at the top. It was only a tool to legitimize the political system and process in which competition for power was not linked with the electorate but the factions in the military. It is, therefore, not surprising that the constitutional rule was replaced by an authoritarian military rule.

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 and given to the formation of political parties, political groups, those who participated in elections, were little more than the personal followers of the politicians in the capital. These parties, therefore, were unable to discipline themselves and did not cooperate 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.

In such an atmosphere where there was no tradition of democratic politics in the western sense of parliamentary party politics as organised political parties weak, students became the focal point of all opposition.
The students imbued with idealism, at the same time frustrated due to unemployment and angered by the army's attempt to curb their freedom, they became the champion of people's cause, clean government free from corruption and free expression, and raised the banner of revolt.

Student revolt of 1973 which overthrew the Thanom government did not emerge all of a sudden. In fact throughout army rule students had been raising their voice against various social political and economic issues and tried to make people aware of the national and international developments which was taking place under army rule. When France surrendered in 1940 and Thai government tried to regain its lost territory to France, students from Chulalongkorn and Thammasat Universities also joined the government in anti-French campaign. In February 1949 when Pridi Banomyong attempted a coup against the Phibun government, students from Thammasat University supported Pridi.

Again in 1957 students protested against the Phibun government when he was charged with fraud in Bangkok election. Students of Chulalongkorn University hung the national flag half-mast, designating the "death of democracy". They were able to build up discontent among general public and the press against the Phibun government which
finally led to the downfall of Phibun regime. Field Marshall Sarit who was city peace keeper, was able to overthrow Phibun regime with the help of students and general public.

The students went for demonstration again in 1962 when the World Court verdict went in favour of Cambodia and Thailand was told to withdraw its forces from the temple ground, although it was not initiated by the students, once they joined the demonstration it spread throughout the country. In February 1969 students went for the demonstration against the 30 percent increase of the bus fare. Government realized the strength of student power and Prime Minister himself ordered the bus fare back to its original price. After the formation of National Student Centre of Thailand (NSCT) in 1969, which played most crucial role during 1973 student uprising, students launched a supervisory organisation called “voluntary Students' Oragnisation for Electoral Supervision” aimed at the coming general election.

NSCT attracted the attention of Thai people when they launched a ten days “Boycott Japanese Goods” campaign. Students requested Thai public not to buy Japanese goods. During this campaign student got overwhelming support from Thai public and media which highlighted
the genuineness of the students worries. King, Bhumibol, also extended
his full support.

The students protested again in December 1972 when government
issued Decree 299 which gave power to control the judges to the
Minister of Justice. The very next day a massive student protest was
launched. The Prime Minister realized the unpopularity of the Decree
299 and called the meeting of National Executive Council and Decree
299 was voted out.

The students, press and public raised their voice against the
government in April 1973 over the “Thung Yai” scandal. Investigation by
a team of students and newspaper reporters revealed that the army
helicopter which crashed on Burma-Thai border on April 29, 1973 was
filled with carcasses of protected animals and was returning from an
illegal hunting expedition in the Thung Yai game preserve. It was first
time that many prominent leaders of opposition parties openly criticized
the Thanom regime.

After the formation of NSCT students became more active day by
day. The most important development during this period was that the
students were able to bring general public and media into the picture
through mass mobilization which was required for the success of any
movement. In 1973, even before the uprising, students held discussion
and symposium on drafting a new constitution. In this task they got support from university professors, intellectuals, the press and general public. An additional factor in their favour was the cracks that was appearing in the army ranks as it was later on apparent from General Kris Sivara's refusal to massacre 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.

All these development had given students unique opportunity to put pressure on government to promulgate a new constitution.

On October 6, 1973, Thirayut, president of NSCT, and twelve other students were arrested while distributing leaflets at the Democracy Monument calling for a new constitution. The government announced that the police had uncovered a communist plot to overthrow the government, and the thirteen were charged with treason. The government's announcement met with widespread public skepticism and anger. Over the years, the public had been fed-up so much government propaganda about the communist threat that this time, people simply refused to accept it. Instead, they were sympathetic to students' cause. From October 6 through October 14, hundreds of thousands of students and general public gathered to support the cause of the jailed students. Government forces restored violence in which
hundreds of students and their sympathisers died. Finally with the intervention of King Bhumibol situation was brought under control and prime minister Thanom and his associates Praphat and Narong were asked to leave the country.

After student uprising, the normal life was disrupted in Bangkok for several weeks due to strikes in the industrial plants factories and even in Railways and Commercial Banks. Long years of dictatorship had kept the Thai people subservient, but student revolt seemed to have awakened the people to awareness of their rights.

The student uprising of 1973 had presented Thailand an opportunity to evolve a stable democratic government. The appointment of Dr. Sanya Dhammasakdi as a Prime Minister by the King was a valuable step towards democratization of Thai politics. Prime Minister announced the formation of civilian dominated government in which only two senior army men were allowed. Prime Minister also urged the students to educate the people in democratic processes and stated his intension of promoting academic freedom in the universities and smoother relationship between the government and students.

The student revolt of 1973 brought back once again the period of open politics and democratic experiment. But from 1973-1976 the political climatic became highly volatile. The students, labour unions
and farmers groups were most active in expressing their grievances and making demands, which brought them into conflict with government officials, business interest groups and landowners. Between 1973 to 1976 several governments had been formed but no one was able to give a stable government. Finally on October 6, 1976 a bloody coup took place in which hundreds of leftists were massacred by the rightists and government forces. After the coup the new government was headed by the former Supreme court Judge Thanin Kraivixien. His dictatorship was worse than the military government in many respect. Finally army General Krisangsak seized power and once again Thailand came under direct army rule.

Right Wing assault on students led them flee to the jungle where they joined communist insurgents who were already fighting against the government forces. Initially students were assigned menial tasks with heavy doses of Moist indoctrination. Students tried their best to live up to the expectations of the communists but soon they discovered ideological differences with them and some of the radicals such as Seksan and Pridi Boonsui rebelled against the communist effort to re-educate them almost from the beginning. As far democracy is concerned communists and students were having totally different views. For the communists, democracy was the process that was to lead them to
monopolize state power, but for the students democracy was the establishment of a political system in which people from every parts of the society could participate under political regulation. While students became disillusioned with the communists, international changes highlighted the Chinese dominance over Communist Party of Thailand (CPT). In the meantime in the Thai capital, Prime Minister Kriangsak announced an amnesty for all those involved in the October 6, 1976 violence and it was extended to those joined communists as well. As a result many student left the jungle and surrendered to the Thai government. Many of such students later on became professors in many Thai Universities, joined media, NGOs and even government services. This group played very crucial role in May 1972 events and were responsible for the restoration of democracy in Thailand.

The period between 1980-1988 is considered to be the most significant period in post 1973 Thai political history. Although Thailand was still under the army rule, the alliance between ruling elites, capitalists and technocrats contributed significantly to Thailand's economic boom and international competitiveness. The phenomenal expansion of middle class was another significant development during this period. They became more politically powerful as result of a wider political space and export oriented economic policy. The members of
middle class were young well educated, and politically conscious and experienced. Despite their relative affluence, they were quite idealistic. A large number of these people were students during 1970s and had direct experience with advent of the post 1973 democratisation. The sensitivities of the middle class were not only based on their social professional advancement, but also on their sense of political conscience, reminiscent of their days during 1970s, at the height of student activism.

When General Suchinda Kraprayoon became the prime minister in May 1992 by breaking his promise made in November 1991, it was the middle class which led the anti-military demonstration and forced him to resign through their die-hard resistance.

After General Suchinda' resignation, free and fair election was held. Chuan Leekpai formed a new government. He was the first Thai prime minister who came from common background and had no experience in the military or bureaucracy. From 1932 to 1992, Thai democracy has gradually moved towards maturity. During this period several developments took place on social, political and economic fronts. Development of civil society, high economic growth rate, free media, high literacy rate and emergence of politically conscious strong middle
class are some of the most important factors which will lead Thailand towards a more representative democracy.

A perusal of the democracy movement in Thailand shows that it was an evolutionary movement taking into account tradition and genius. One would have expected a sudden transition to democracy after 1992 revolt but taking into account the socio-political condition in Thailand one has to be pragmatic and take into account of the fact that democracy can flourish in Thailand in incremental steps as all democracies in other parts of the world.