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THAILAND VS. EGYPT: REFLECTIONS ON THE CONCEPT OF 'ELECTORAL DICTATORSHIP'

Abstract:

Thailand and Egypt have seen some striking parallels in the past few years, culminating in military overthrows of elected governments, acts which were widely supported by the middle classes. This paper examines middle class thinking behind opposition to the governments, and subsequent support for the military takeovers.

Both Pheu Thai and the Muslim Brotherhood won elections based on real support, including among middle class voters, although the margins of victory were smaller than sometimes portrayed. (The Muslim Brotherhood won slightly under 52% of the popular vote in 2012; Pheu Thai won just under 50% in 2011.) Once elected, they abused power, pursued their own narrow agendas, and seemed to be dismantling checks, balances, and liberties of truly democratic systems. Thailand's middle class opposition labeled this 'parliamentary dictatorship'.

Whether it is called this, 'electoral authoritarianism', or 'majoritarianism', the concept is well known in political science. Pheu Thai and Muslim Brotherhood supporters frequently pointed to their election wins to justify simply doing what they wanted without regard for other views, for law, courts, or constitutions. To the urban middle classes, this is a very narrow understanding of 'democracy'. They are more likely to agree with Yale law professor Robert Post: "It is a grave mistake to confuse democracy with particular decision-making procedures and to fail to identify the core values that democracy as a form of government seeks to instantiate" (Post 2005, p. 25).

The middle classes became disillusioned with electoral 'democracy' and shifted hopes to institutions that were supposed to provide checks on government authority, notably the courts. Pheu Thai and the Muslim Brotherhood then tried to control and/or sideline the courts and other independent agencies. "The only remaining barrier (other than the military) to Islamist hegemony is the judiciary. If the Muslim Brotherhood and its FJP take control of courts and judges, this check will disappear, and Egypt could move from liberalized autocracy to electoral authoritarianism" (Brumberg 2013, p. 101).

The urban middle classes in both Thailand and Egypt came out into massive street protests, polarization crystalized, and the situation rapidly degenerated. When the military stepped in, there was widespread middle class support for the moves, which is unlikely to dissipate quickly.

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Introduction

Thailand and Egypt have seen some striking parallels in the past few years, with tumultuous electoral politics and elections which brought arguably anti-democratic parties to power. These governments implemented policies and behaved in ways which alienated a wide range of citizens, all the while claiming that whatever they did was justified because the 'won the election'. This led to massive protests, culminating in military overthrows of the elected governments, acts which were widely supported by the middle classes. This paper examines middle class thinking behind opposition to these elected governments, and subsequent support for the military takeovers.

The paper examines differing views of democracy held by the two sides in the political battles. One side views it simply as elections – if they can win a vote, they have won the right to do whatever they want. The other side views democracy as a broader set of values and institutions, which includes accountability and checks and balances on power. In both countries, the opposition came to view the elected governments as 'electoral dictatorships' which failed to hold to democratic values or accept any checks and balances on their power.

Pheu Thai in Thailand pursued its own agenda, mainly in support of the interests of the Shinawatra business empire. The Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party pursued its own agenda of radical Islamization of the state, disregarding sentiment among the majority of Egyptians who did not support this agenda. As a result, the urban middle class, in particular, turned against the parties in power, and has come to distrust 'democracy', if democracy is simply to be defined as elections. They want thorough reform of the system to bring in the values and strengthen the institutions which provide checks and balances, before there is any return to elections.

'Democracy' vs. electoral dictatorship

It appears that the precise nature of "democracy" has long been a major problem in many developing countries. In fact, the problem resides in the way governance is carried out by the ruling party and ability (or lack of) to consistently uphold democratic values. Thailand and Egypt serve as good examples to examine these issues, in which the similarities and differences will be explained to understand how modern politics can abuse the principle of democracy. Both Pheu Thai and the Muslim Brotherhood won elections based on some real support, including initially among middle class voters, although their 'mandates' were somewhat smaller than often portrayed. (The Muslim Brotherhood won slightly under 52% of the popular vote in 2012; Pheu Thai won slightly more than 48% in 2011.) Once elected, they abused power, pursued their own narrow agendas, and seemed to be dismantling checks, balances, and liberties of truly democratic systems.

Regardless of the elections as a means of coming to power, the elected governments of these two countries seemingly discarded every other democratic principle and largely concentrated on keeping their power. Thailand's middle class labeled this 'elective dictatorship', as in a reader's letter to the editor in 2012 (The Nation March 27, 2012). The concept is well established in the political science literature, which may use this term (e.g., Aldons 2002; Aroney et al 2008); or several others, such as 'parliamentary dictatorship" (common in discussion on Thailand, e.g., Maisrikrod 2008; Hewison 2014), "electoral authoritarianism" (e.g., Schedler 2006), or "majoritarianism" (e.g., Macedo 2010; Issacharoff 2013). Whichever any term is used, such conduct has crucially undermined democracy.

In a generic sense, democracy is a practical framework of good governance that incorporates the public opinion in decision-making process. To the certain extent, it is often taught that democracy is the best form of governance because it embodies the people's will. However, democracy transcends just a simple process of voting or majority rule, which only serves as a procedure. Pheu Thai and Muslim Brotherhood supporters frequently pointed to their election wins to justify simply doing what they wanted without regard for other views, for law, courts, or constitutions. To the urban middle classes, this is a very narrow understanding of 'democracy'. They are more likely to agree with Yale law professor Robert Post:

"It is a grave mistake to confuse democracy with particular decision-making procedures and to fail to identify the core values that democracy as a form of government seeks to instantiate" (Post 2005, p. 25).

It is important to include the protection of the minority, respect for basic human rights, non-interference with independent institutions, cooperation with agencies to promote liberties, solidification of legality and constitution, and maintaining checks and balances through all of these things. Moreover, democracy needs to be sufficiently effective to enhance economic, social, and political stability. One problem is that the 'democracy' often being practiced around the world nowadays seems to provide no certainty that the ruling party actually believes in these principles. Unfortunately, the principle has been misused and corrupted by authoritarian government or dictatorship. Subsequently, dictatorial rule can work through manipulation, giving rise to a different form of government (Rudebeck, 2002; Post, 2005; Ober, 2008).

In recent decades since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, there has been a wave of 'democratization' around the world, including very recently, in the Middle East through the Arab Spring. Even though there are an increasing number of democratized countries, social preference and election transparency remain inadequately monitored (Schedler, 2006). Parliamentary dictatorship is not new, but it seems to be becoming quite common that a political party comes to power through winning majority vote and then abuses their power to achieve a very narrow agenda rather than focus on the broader public good. As Malcolm Aldons put it

"An elective dictatorship comes into being when strong, disciplined political parties prevent parliament from exercising its original and supposed function of controlling the executive government." (2002, pp. 2-3).

Aldons (2002), looking at the situation in Australia (and the United Kingdom), actually argued that 'elective dictatorships' cannot really exist, because the checks and balances will restrain the ruling party from acquiring absolute power, and eventually, public opinion will be able to vote it out of office. This argument, however, does not take into account the situation in developing countries, where opposition, although widespread, may be fractured, and where independent institutions are often too weak to provide much check and balance. Both in theory and practice, the ruling party would take control of the seats in parliament and establish political monopoly over any opposition allowing their agendas to be carried out arbitrarily. The two recent examples, Thailand and Egypt, have given a fundamental insight as to how parliamentary dictatorship works and that there are parallels between the two countries.

Pheu Thai and the Justice and Freedom Party

Pheu Thai is the party of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. PT is actually the third iteration; the original party was named 'Thai Rak Thai', which took power after elections in 2001, and again in 2005. TRT was founded in 1998 to serve as the vehicle for Thaksin's ascent to power as the leader of big business interests (e.g., Phongpaichit & Baker, forthcoming; Pye & Schaffar 2008).

> "More than any other party, the TRT represented the interests of big domestic business. … It was the threat to business interests and power posed by neoliberal policy reform that caused the remaining tycoons to conclude that domestic capital needed supportive government policies, which could only be achieved by taking control of the State." (Rodan & Hewison 2006, p. 114)

After the 2006 coup d'état ousted Thaksin on acquisitions of rampant corruption and increasing authoritarianism, TRT was dissolved, but reconstituted under a new name. The People's Power Party (PPP) won power for a short period once the military stepped back out of government. Some of his parliamentary allies switched sides and the opposition took power for a few years, but Pheu Thai, the third iteration (PPP was also banned for substantial voting irregularities), won elections in 2011 (Pongsudhirak 2012, 2013; Ueranantasun 2012).

Under analysis, two variables – geography and demography – can be observed as a foundation for authoritarian manipulation and polarized politics. In Thailand in recent years, the two major political parties that received most of the vote were Thaksin's party and the Democrats. The two were actually more or less evenly matched in terms of core support – each has consistently commanded about a third of voters as staunch loyalists. However, the rest of the electorate was fractured into small parties, and Thaksin proved more skilled at pulling them into coalition at first, and then into his party as factions. This mainly worked well in the more rural regions in North and Northeast (Isaan) Thailand, but the Northeast, in particular, is heavily populated. The Democrats have always been concentrated more in the South and Central provinces. The difference in terms of socio-cultural context was that the South and Central regions, including Bangkok, tend to be more developed and have a better living standard, more middle class. Thus, although it is certainly more complex, roughly the political divide polarized into the poorer and more rural North and Northeast against the Central and South (Nogsuan 2007; Phongpaichit & Baker 2008; Ueranuntasun, 2012).

Thaksin's parties used populist policies to win support among rural people beyond their core constituency. Some of these policies have done some good (and are likely to be retained by the current military government), but others have not; some have proven ruinous for State finances. At any rate, even many rural people who are not necessarily staunch Thaksin supporters feel that they gained something from his policies, and were unlikely to switch their votes until equally attractive benefits were offered by the opposition (Phongpaichit & Baker 2008, Pye & Schaffar 2008; Pongsudhirak 2012). In the beginning, too, TRT had credibility even among the middle class – basically because they were 'not those guys' who had been doing so poorly in the previous years. Thailand was just coming out of the economic crash of 1997, and there was still substantial pain across the whole electorate (Phongpaichit and Baker 2002; Harker 2003)

The Phua Thai administration, however, proved quite inept after an initial promising start, and by late 2013, Phua Thai had begun to substantially lose ground, with support declining to its roughly one-third of staunch supporters. One poll in Isaan in November 2013 shows that only 34 percent would have voted for Phua Thai at that date, down from 56 percent a year earlier. However, most of the switch was to smaller regional parties, which actually represents a return to traditional political patterns before Thaksin consolidated political power in his own parties (Asian Correspondent Nov 05 2013). A different nation-wide poll about the same time showed only 27 percent would have voted for Pheu Thai, down from 51 percent a year earlier. However, the opposition Democrats gained only marginally, to about 34 percent (Thai PBS November 11 2013).

In the case of Egypt, the political pattern has always been a concern on the international scale due to the fact that the country is a major player in the Arab world. Politics in the Arab world can seem rather volatile, sometimes oppressive, and even dangerous due to the nature of authority and social inequality. Since Hosni Mubarak and the National Democratic Party (NDP) came to power, Egypt has experienced stagnation, severe corruption, exclusion of youth, and lack of political succession (e.g., Ibrahim 2011; Shehata, 2011). For decades, there has been disgruntlement toward the government among many Egyptians because of ineffective policies and problematic elections. With the Arab Spring, the country soon found itself in a political turbulence and in February 11, 2011 Mubarak finally stepped down and was replaced by temporary military rule until the next election could be held (Brown 2012; Cammett & Jones Luong 2014).

The Muslim Brotherhood by far the most organized party after Mubarak's time, a new election was eventually held and the Freedom and Justice Party, a newly formed party of the Muslim Brotherhood, made off with their victory. Initially, they enjoyed some degree of broader support among urban and rural classes and hoped to stabilize the organization's influence. Unlike the Muslim brotherhood, other political parties tended to struggle with organization and have received less support. In 2011, FJP won the majority seats in the parliament. One year following Mohammed Morsi won the presidential election (Bowker 2013; Brynen et al., 2013). Such result seemed to provide a firm foundation for the Islamist regime in Egypt:

> "The movement deemed control over the old state necessary to enact its broader political vision. Brotherhood leaders believed that all they needed was a process of elite turnover to gain control of the existing state institutions, which they could Islamize once they had consolidated power" (El-Sherif 2014, p. 4)

However, the situation in Egypt is actually similar to Thailand in many respects. The Muslim Brotherhood over-estimated its support. It seems to command a core of staunch loyalists that may amount to roughly a third of the population. Morsi actually only received one-quarter of the vote in the first round of the 2012 presidential elections (Al-Ississ and Atallah 2014). The opposition was so fractured that an old-regime loyalist actually came in second, with nearly as many votes as Morsi, and voters in the runoff had to make a difficult choice. The majority probably did not really liking either of the two candidates, but decided Morsi was the lesser of evils. After decades of authoritarian rule, the Brotherhood was the best organized, they were able to mobilize their supporters, and they carried some degree of sympathy even from

non-Brotherhood supporters for their consistent principled opposition the old regime (Martini and Worman 2013; Cammett & Jones Luong 2014).

The patterns are much more complex than simply Islamist vs. more secular voters. Egypt is a conservative society, and a substantial number of voters tend to be strongly religious, especially outside more urbanized areas. However, not all of them support the Muslim Brotherhood. For example, the Salafists, conservative Islamist factions, fielded a number of parties which collectively gained a substantial portion of votes. They did occasionally cooperate tactically with the Muslim Brotherhood in particular districts to oppose secular candidates, but they were not very enthusiastic about the Brotherhood's political agenda. Eventually, they were unhappy with the Brotherhood's dictatorial tendencies, too, and did not oppose the coup which ousted Morsi (Al-Ississ and Atallah 2014; Martini and Worman 2013; Cammett & Jones Luong 2014; Hamzawy 2014). This is analogous to the case in Thailand where a substantial number of people supported Thaksin tactically, but were not staunch core supporters.

Middle class perceptions
The trajectory in both Thailand and Egypt was quite similar. After both Pheu Thai and FJP won parliamentary elections in 2011, and the FJP won the presidential elections in 2012, they took control and always referred to the election in justifying their agendas. They have misjudged the situation, believing that all the tactical support they had gained was actually core support, or they may simply not have cared, moving to consolidate power while they had the chance. At any rate, both Pheu Thai and the FJP used their control of the executive and strong position in Parliament to implement their own narrow agendas. Staunch core supporters may have liked this, but the tactical support did not, nor, of course, did the opposition which had never been tactical supporters.

One key issue to the middle classes was abuse of power and continuous attempts to undermine independent institutions and rule of law. As discussed above, these are part of the core understanding of 'democracy' among the middle classes. In Thailand, this tendency was clear from the early days of TRT rule:

"Indeed, if Mr Thaksin has one clear aim, it is to concentrate as much power in his own hands as possible. … He appears to see little merit in checks and balances. When the Constitutional Court was reviewing his case, he wondered aloud whether an elected prime minister should have to submit to decisions by unelected judges. … He has spent much of his time in office castigating the press, academics, businessmen and anyone else who criticises him." (Economist 2002)

Thaksin's musings about whether he should be subject to court rulings became official policy in 2013. When the Constitutional Court ruled in late 2013 that a constitutional amendment passed by Parliament was illegal, and as well, that the somewhat dubious procedure under which it was passed was also illegal, Pheu Thai announced that it was not subject to rulings by the Constitutional Court (e.g., The Nation November 21, 2013; Sattaburuth 22 November, 2013). After all, the party was elected, so it had a mandate to do what it wanted. PT laid this out clearly in its statement rejecting the ruling:

"Whether the performance of parliamentarians is good or satisfactory in the eyes of the public or suitable or not, the people will decide in elections. This is the principle of the using of the ruling mandate. The court must not violate this principle of ruling mandate because doing so was tantamount to a coup that seized the ruling power from the people" (The Nation, November 21, 2013, quoting the Pheu Thai statement).

The Thai middle class has come to view 'democracy' as a cover for massive corruption without much legal restraint. An editorial cartoon in The Nation shows Thaksin, dressed in a black 'kleptocracy' suit and wearing a yellow happy face mask labeled 'democracy', making off with a huge bag of 'my money', laughing about the 2 trillion Baht (about US$ 62 billion) infrastructure loan that Pheu Thai passed (The Nation http://www.nationmultimedia.com/specials/nationphoto/index.php?pid=17034#). This State money was supposedly 'off-budget', and thus not subject to Constitutional requirements of Parliamentary oversight of the State budget.   The Constitutional Court ruled against the law (The Nation January 10, 2014), and Pheu Thai announced they would not abide by this court decision either.

The Muslim Brotherhood in power had much the same philosophy. It did not appreciate opposition to its agenda, and aimed to sideline any opposition, using authoritarian measures. "Its period in government was characterized by incapacity to share power and draw upon the skills and experience of those beyond their immediate power base" (Bowker 2013, p. 585).

"Morsi treated these oppositionists as so many annoyances who could safely be overlooked. His supporters met shrill critiques with shrill responses, sometimes resorting to authoritarian speech restrictions that were still very much part of Egypt's legal order" (Brown 2013, p. 49)

"Five months into his term, seeking to capitalise on his Gaza success and to break a festering deadlock with secular opponents, Mr Morsi issued a shock, six-part decree that granted sweeping new powers to his office (Economist Dec 1, 2012).

As in Thailand, Egypt's middle classes relied on independent institutions, notably the courts, as a check against the arbitrary power (Brown 2013; Brumberg 2013). They did sometimes take an active role is slowing down the Brotherhood's consolidation of power, but were not entirely successful (e.g., Bowker 2013). The Brotherhood government seemed to be moving to reduce the role of the courts and/or take control of them.

"The only remaining barrier (other than the military) to Islamist hegemony is the judiciary. If the Muslim Brotherhood and its FJP take control of courts and judges, this check will disappear, and Egypt could move from liberalized autocracy to electoral authoritarianism" (Brumberg 2013, p. 101).

The Egyptian middle class may now view 'democracy' as a cover for radical Islamization. An Egyptian editorial cartoon from January 2013 shows Islamists sailing away in their Islamic 'constitution' boat, leaving a mass Egyptians on shore saying "and   what   about   us?"   (Cartoon   Movement

http://www.cartoonmovement.com/cartoon/8562). The same cartoonist has another cartoon showing Morsi kicking away the 'democracy' ladder once he has reached power (a high throne) with the label 'referendum' (Cartoon Movement http://www.cartoonmovement.com/cartoon/8563), referring to the referendum in which 64 percent approved the new Brotherhood constitution, but with only about 30 percent voter turnout (AlJazeera 23 Dec 2012)

Outside assessments of rule of law in both Thailand and Egypt confirm that middle class fears were justified. Thaksin's parties have been in power much of the time since 2001, and the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators show steady decline in rule of law (Figure 1). The trend was not halted until a short period of opposition rule beginning in early 2009. However, Thailand has been unable to make much progress to regain the levels it enjoyed in the 1990s. Under Mubarak, Egypt scored low in this 'rule of law' index all along, but the chaos of the Arab Spring caused a large drop, and then a continued drop once the Muslim Brotherhood gained control of Parliament in 2011. Of course, for Egypt, one must be a little more careful with this assessment because the Brotherhood was in power only a short time, and its time in control of the executive is not yet included in this data. Nevertheless, the pattern seems consistent with widespread reporting on the issue.

A second key issue to the middle class has been economic decline under both Pheu Thai and the Muslim Brotherhood. Thailand's economy has been very rocky in the past few years, as the government focused on its own narrow agenda and seemingly paid little attention to broader interests. The World Economic Forum's *Global Competitiveness Report* shows that Thailand declined in competitiveness on a number of macro-indicators over the past few years under Pheu Thai rule (Figure 2). (Speece 2014, in this proceedings, shows that the decline in competitiveness is long-term, started under Thaksin's TRT government.)
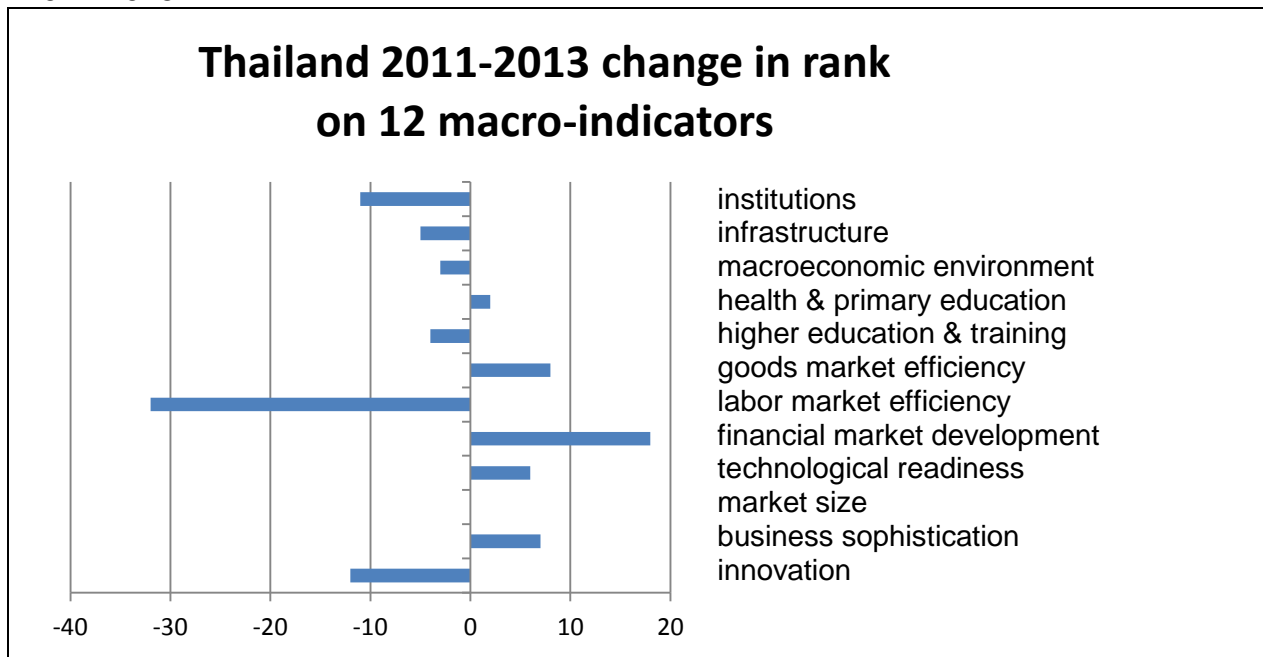
Figure 1: Declining rule of law: World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators
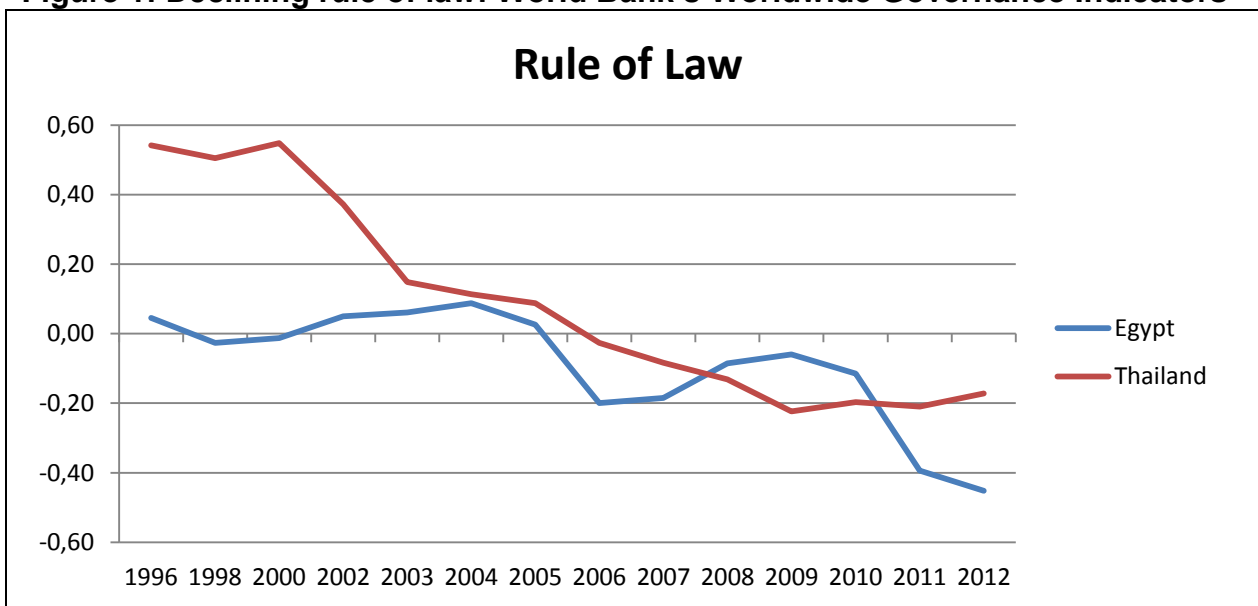
note: scale goes from -2.5 (very poor) to +2.5 (very good)
source: World Bank. 2014.

Figure 2: Thailand's change in rank on 12 competitiveness macro-indicators, 2011-2013

source: based on: World Economic Forum. 2014.

Egypt shows similar decline over this period (from an already low base under Mubarak), when the Muslim Brotherhood first gained a majority in Parliament (2011) and then gained the presidency (2012) (Figure 3). "In addition to his tactical and strategic flaws, Morsi did not have many policy achievements. For most Egyptians, conditions got worse during his presidency" (Brown July 4, 2013).

Figure 3: Egypt's change in rank on 12 competitiveness macro-indicators, 2011-2013
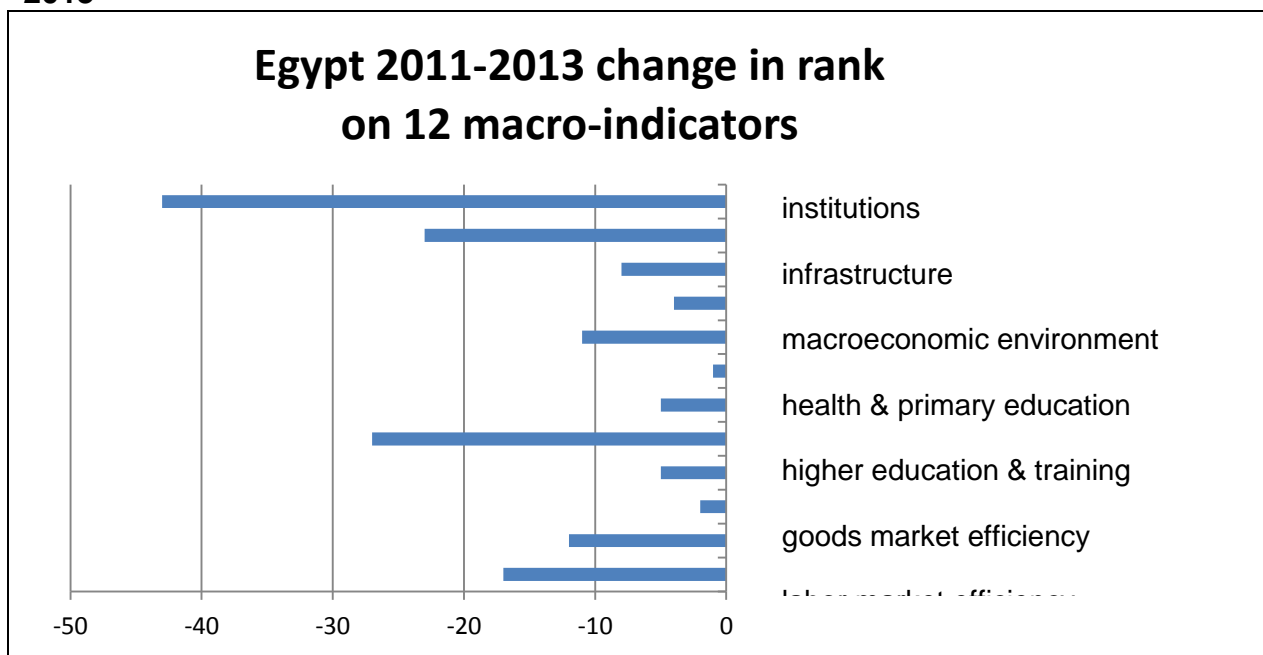
source: based on: World Economic Forum. 2014.

Disillusionment with democracy

Thus, democracy has lost credibility among the Thai and Egyptian middle classes. In both countries, they believe that once elected, winners ignore substance of democracy and pursue their own narrow agendas, to the detriment of the nation. 'Democracy' to Thai middle class voters now seems to be a cover for corruption. Even the big business, which originally supported Thaksin's pro-big business agenda, turned against him because it seemed to be mostly Shinawatra big business which benefitted. The Egyptian middle class now seems to view 'democracy' as a cover for radical Islamization, which ignores substantial parts of Egyptian society which do not want a strongly Islamized state (even though some of them are devote Muslims). Electoral democracy is perceived as being detrimental to the rule of law, and it brings economic decline, as elected power ignores national interests to benefit itself.

Ironically, the middle class has come to believe that they are more likely to eventually get democracy as they think of it through a period of military rule than through elected governments. Certainly the military is considered an important check on undemocratic elected governments. Earlier in the Pheu Thai administration, The Nation editoralized

> "the threat of a coup can be an effective check on the thought of any Thai government in forcing measures that are despicable and unpalatable down the throats of Thai citizens. Only when Thai politicians know their limits, then the Army will not have just cause to move tanks to an intersection, and tanks would not be surrounded by jubilant crowds" (The Nation March 27, 2012).

Post-coup, it seems somewhat ironic that Thailand's military government appears to understand some of the values of democracy better than did the previous elected government.

> ""We understand that we are living in a democratic world, but we must also examine ourselves to see how Thailand can be resilient in the face of the many challenges that democracy brings. We therefore need to adjust ourselves in many ways – from administration methods to the budget system, even the electoral system – the starting point of democracy itself. Checks and balances need to be improved. Parliamentary dictatorship has to be removed." said General Prayut" (Thailand Business News Jun 9, 2014)

Egyptians similarly want 'good government' that will help move Egypt forward toward a more democratic future. They do not think elections can do this under current conditions.

> "Now, with experience of inept, and for many, alarming, rule by the Muslim Brotherhood firmly in mind, most remain to be convinced that a full-blown parliamentary democracy remains preferable to rule by a strong (but just) authoritarian leader. For many, also, the ideology of the leader may matter less than the quality of government performance in meeting material concerns" (Bowker 2013, p. 584).

Clearly, the problem is the discrepancy in perspectives of how democracy should be constructed. The idea that democracy is only about election and whoever

wins the election gets to rule is regarded by the middle classes as pseudo democracy. This is merely a formal decision procedure to them, and does not necessarily have anything to do with good governance, fairness, justice, restraint on arbitrary power, or anything in the whole set of core values which they believe democracy is about. Democracy requires a strong set of institutions, respect of independent institutions, minority rights, and the maintenance of checks and balances. Election does not give absolute power, and cannot be used as a cover to tear down all the core values of democracy. To the middle class, things are indeed as we already quoted Yale law professor Robert Post in the beginning of this paper:

> "It is a grave mistake to confuse democracy with particular decision-making procedures and to fail to identify the core values that democracy as a form of government seeks to instantiate" (Post, 2005, pp. 25).

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