Legitimacy Crisis and Thailand’s Road to National Reconciliation

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Abstract

Amid political turmoil, the anti-government protests that gripped the Thai capital city of Bangkok for more than two months in early 2010 resulted in more than a thousand people getting injured and a death toll of about 91 people, most of them were unarmed civilians. Although the demonstrations were brought to an end by government forces, the initial problem was never resolved, as the events were merely symptoms of a Thai disease that is now long in progress. The extreme polarization and turmoil that had come to afflict Thai politics and society by 2010 grew out of a number of underlying problems. The results of the government sponsored "reconciliation plan" show failure of traditional approach to resolve the conflict which is hidden deeply in Thai culture and long history of paternalist rule. With the forthcoming royal transition Thailand today is on the threshold of important changes. Conflict over the shape of the future order of the polity can only be resolved by the negotiation of a new social contract. With thus said, through the analysis of Thai political culture and current political events this research aims to shed light on the nature of the problems in Thai society and elaborate on the ideas of sustainable reconciliation process in the country.
# The Table of Content

## Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 4

I. Theoretical Framework ........................................................................................................ 13
   Reconciliation ..................................................................................................................... 13
   Political Culture .................................................................................................................. 19

II. Thai Political Culture ......................................................................................................... 26
   Political Tradition ............................................................................................................... 27
   Western Influence of the Formation of Thai Political Tradition ........................................ 28
   The Role of Monarchy in the Political Life of Thailand ...................................................... 29
   Economic Change ............................................................................................................... 34

III. Reconciliation road map .................................................................................................... 38
   Reconciliation Initiative ..................................................................................................... 38
   Together We Can Campaign .............................................................................................. 41
   Reconciliation Plan in Effect ............................................................................................. 45
   Emergency decree ............................................................................................................. 49
   Lese Majeste Law .............................................................................................................. 50
   2007 Computer Crime Act ............................................................................................... 58

IV. Research Findings and Results ......................................................................................... 62
   Failed Reconciliation ......................................................................................................... 62
   Reconciliation Postponed ................................................................................................. 66
   Conclusion ......................................................................................................................... 73
   References ......................................................................................................................... 78
Introduction

Political situation in Thailand
Since 2008 Thailand has been gripped by an ongoing political crisis in form of a conflict between the People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD) and the People’s Power Party (PPP) and later between the Democrat Party government of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva and the National United Front of Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD). It is a continuation of the events of the year 2006 when the former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra was forced out from the office in a military coup and later was found guilty in a Thai court of corruption and left the country to escape imprisonment. In December 2008 the new Prime Minister Democrat Party leader Abhisit Vejjajiva assumed the office and became a person whom some Thais hoped might help usher political stability to Thailand.

However already in a few months later, in March 2009, Thaksin Shinawatra claimed via video broadcast that some influential members of the Democratic Party masterminded the coup in 2006 and conspired with the military to ensure that Abhisit became Premier. His speech resulted in numerous anti-government protests in the beginning of April 2009 when hundreds of people dresses in red shirts, the color of the UDD, forced the cancellation of the 14th summit of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), they stormed a building hosting the summit in Pattaya, honking horns and chanting slogans against the government of Abhisit Vejjajiva. Day later protesters have surrounded the home of an influential royal adviser in Bangkok, accusing him of engineering a coup three years ago; about 30 000 of people camped around Government House for two weeks trying to force the current Prime Minister to resign. After several clashes with military that took life of two and injured more than hundreds of people, the red-shirts recessed their strikes, but only to return almost a year later.

Escalation of the conflict: urban unrest in March-May 2010
In the early morning of the March, 12 five bombs exploded in Surat Thani Bangkok area, a Democrat Party stronghold. Two days later tens of thousands of red-shirted protesters rallied in Bangkok to press for the Thai government to resign or face further demonstrations at key locations in the city. "We’re demanding the government give up its
administrative power by dissolving parliament and returning power to the people," said a protest leader, Veera Musikapong. "We're giving the government 24 hours."¹ Promising not to leave until the government stood down, the protesters stresses that they would use only peaceful means. In his weekly radio address that morning, the Prime Minister Abhisit indicated that he had no plans to dissolve the legislature. "The protesters have demanded that I dissolve the house before midday (05:00 GMT) today, but the coalition parties agree the demand cannot be met"². As a return step protesters splash their own blood at Government House. A round of talks with the government that followed those actions ends in deadlock.

Advancing their strike actions, in the beginning of April the red-shirts moved from their first camp around Government house into Bangkok’s shopping hub. Over the course of a month, they stormed parliament, the Election Commission and a key satellite TV base.

Being afraid that the government would lose control over the situation, Prime Minister ordered the state of emergency. On 10 April an attempt by the military to clear demonstrators from one of their camps turned violent. At least 25 people were killed, including at least five soldiers.

After two months of maintaining protest camps in various parts of Bangkok, the Red Shirts were forced to disperse when soldiers launched a crackdown against the protesters. More than 30 people have been killed. On 17 May the government gave a deadline of 15:00 (08:00 GMT) for protesters to leave the protest area. Violence escalated last on 19 May during the final assault operation of the military, some of the main red-shirt leaders told their followers to give up the protest and go home. Most left the protest camp but others fought the army. A number of buildings, including a major shopping center, government buildings and the stock exchange, were set on fire, causing serious damage. According to the data available on August, 25, the military crackdown resulted in the death of 91 people, most of them unarmed civilians, and more than thousand of people injured³.

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¹ Guardian.co.uk. ‘Thai protesters threaten to march on key Bangkok sites’, 14.03.2010, assessed on November 20, 2010
² BBC News Online, ‘Thai PM rejects protest ultimatum’, 15.03.2010, assessed on November 20, 2010
³ The Irrawaddy, ‘Thailand’s Reconciliation is Likely to Fail’, 25.08.2010, assessed on January 27, 2011
**Reasons of the conflict**

Construing the consequences of the invasions that swept over Europe during the second half of the first millennium, the French medievalist Marc Bloch noted: “Just as the progress of a disease shows a doctor the secret life of a body, so to the historian the progress of a great calamity yields valuable information about the nature of the society so stricken.”

Demonstrations came to the end; however, the problem was not solved. Those events represented only symptoms of a Thai disease that now long in progress. The extreme polarization and turmoil that had come to afflict Thai politics and society by early 2010 grew out of a number of underlying problems. It was traditionally accepted that the supporters of the former Prime Minister Thaksin are mostly poor people from the North provinces of Thailand who benefited from the populist policy of the prime Minister when he was in the office. On the opposite side, there are yellow shirts, supporters of the present government, represented by elite and high middle class. Thus one can talk about the socio-economic divide in the country. However more detailed analysis shows incompetence of this approach. The causes of the conflict are rooted much deeper. According to Michael Montesano, “red”- “yellow” division in Thai society represented the surface manifestation of deep pathologies in the Thai body politic. Among the four pathologies he named are the structure of the post-1997 economy, the figure of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, the implication of the conflict in the far south and concerns surrounding the end of the current reign. In a broad sense we can talk about the period of transformation in the Thai society.

Transformation, by definition, is characterized by the coexistence of the traditional and an emerging economic, social, political and cultural order. Newly emerging actors struggle to have more say in political decision making process. The distribution of wealth, social hierarchies and roles are being transformed. Opposing political projects struggle to define a new order. Underneath these politico-economic struggles, ever more pluralist values and interests, as well as shifting conceptual paradigms undermine the traditional framework of ideas, identities, and narratives that define a nation. Traditional notion of the “good order,” represented by hierarchical bureaucratic political system with the monarch on the top of the pyramid, is being challenged by emerging

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new ideas and concepts of democracy and equal representation. Notably, the expectations what mandates political power, what constitutes a legitimate decision-making process, and what outcomes should be produced by the system are being transformed.

**Global Context and Research Actuality**

Although Thailand's unrest is culturally and historically specific, its current political situation lends itself to more international comparison than most commentators who present it as an entirely unique case might admit. Many countries around the globe went through similar transitional phase. It is extremely important period in the life of the country, time when the vector of the historical development can change dramatically. The contradictions between traditional and new concepts, between rhetoric (that "should be") and reality (that "is") open up new cleavages, and can be used to mobilize widespread protest. Accordingly, the widespread support for the opposing social movements in the so called red-yellow conflict, while certainly being instrumentalized by opposing elites, can only be fully explained by contradicting notions of a "good order" and a "just society".

Ethical questions set aside, history shows that suppression only works to deepen a legitimacy crisis, while ill-conceived reconciliation initiatives could backfire and deepen the conflict. Iraq, Zimbabwe, Afghanistan are just several examples of failed national and international reconciliation incentives, where poor understanding of the needs of the population and underestimation of the causes of the polarization brought even more disorder and violence to the countries. Competent approach, on the opposite, can lead to the conflict to be resolved peacefully and to bring re-united society to more democratic system. But those cases are exceptions from the rule. Unfortunately most of the time, the situation escalates to the violent conflict and many people die before any significant change happens. Thailand today is in the similar situation with its ongoing political crisis. What is worse, that the crisis seems to have a great potential to deepen and bring even more violence and deaths unless important steps to conflict resolution and reconciliation in the polarized society are taken. Those who are in power have very limited time to not only understand the roots of the problem, as I believe that the government does actually understand it, but also intend real reconciliation, and not only window dressing to buy some time.
In this regard, it might be appropriate to mention that just several weeks ago, in January 2011 very significant events were happening in the other part of the globe. Anti-government demonstrations in Tunisia resulted in reassignment of their President ending his more than 20 years of authoritarian rule in the country. Only ten days later the protests against the state authorities flared up in Egypt and Yemen. The meaning of those events for the rest of the world and for Thailand in particular, is still to be seen, yet that success can inspire other nations to begin the struggle for their rights.

**Research Questions and Hypothesis**

The primary questions this research seeks to answer are: *What reconciliation in Thailand should be about? How it could be addressed? Is there any possibility to achieve it in the near future?* To address the issue, I will examine the following constituent questions:

- What are the main causes for the political crisis?
- What is the response of the government on the situation?
- What are the obstacles to the resolution of the crisis?
- Which underlying grievances can be identified behind these symbolic issues put forward by participants of the red or yellow movement?
- Are there any other actors, except for red and yellow, influence the development of the situation in the country?
- Are there any external factors that influence the situation?

**Hypothesis.** The long history of military coups shows that replacement of one government or prime minister by another does not change a lot. The problem is rooted in the corrupted bureaucratic system that has developed during the centuries and maintained by the institution of monarchy, strong military and hierarchical tradition. At the same time, Thai political system in the constitutional monarchy and every political actor, without any exception, claims that democratic principles are of the first priority for him. These two political traditions highly contradict each other. Moreover, rapid economic development creates new forces in the society that no longer except their minor role. Thus in order to achieve sustainable peace in Thai society it is important to address both dimensions of the conflict: to satisfy the claims for bigger participation of emerging actors, and to address new notions of legitimacy and justice which means reformation of the traditional political order and
rethinking of the role of monarchy. Conflict over the shape of the future order of the polity can only be resolved by the negotiation of a new social contract.

Once the violence that took place in Thailand during April and May 2010 was over, the government has launched reconciliation plan aimed to bring sustainable peace in Thai society. Eight months passed since that time: the red-shirts demonstrations take plays twice month in the emergency decree was lifted in December; yellow shorts, once being supporters of the current Prime Minister, after the incident on Cambodian border also went to the street the call for to government to resolve as it was not able to influence the situation. Amnesty International is reporting continuing violations of human right in Thailand.

All those indicators show that the governmental efforts to resolve the conflict are at least not very efficient for the reason that it address mostly social-economic and not cultural/value divide plus the process has been taking place in extremely inappropriate political environment. The institute of monarchy and everything associated with it is a taboo for critical discussion. The Article 8 of Constitution of Thailand states that the King “shall be enthroned in a position of revered worship and shall not be violated. No person shall expose the King to any sort of accusation or action.” Provision of this statement is put into practice through severe punishments stipulated by the Penal Code and some other legislative acts that are often used for political purposes by different political forces to discredit their opponents and exclude them from the competition as well as to restrict freedom of speech in the country. This has to be changed first in order to achieve true reconciliation. However, bureaucratic forces that oppose democratic are still very powerful, military interference in every political conflict and the King active and influential before is now too weak and dependent on the system to be able to initiate reforms. What make situation worse is that the country's political leader, the Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva is seen by population to be responsible for the deaths of more than 90 people during demonstrations early this year. I believe for those reasons, in a short term prospective there is little opportunity for conflict resolution. The reconciliation is long-term process and many thing need to be changed before it is possible, and first of all people's perceptions and values. Yet, Thailand today is in its transitions
point and it is important not to overlook the moment and turn in the right direction.

**Research methodology**

*Data Collection.* The research is qualitative in nature. To collect primary data, I relied on the competent individuals’ advice and opinion, as well as unsystematic unstructured interviews with local people. Secondly I have conducted direct observation in the field during the demonstrations in March-May 2010 and in early 2011.

To support my study with secondary data, I conducted document research looking at country reports, those from Amnesty International, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (where I was doing my internship), the International Crisis Group; national and international legislation such as Constitution and Criminal Code of the Kingdom of Thailand, The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Thailand is a state party. I was doing a review of Thai and international media. The most frequently used online sources of news were Bangkok Post, Prachathai, BBC News, CNN and the Nation. Additionally I gave much attention to the web blogs, mostly German and English speaking, but also some Thai, where different aspects of the crises discussed by ordinary people from Thailand and abroad. This method is relevant to setting the global and local context and identifying the extent, dimensions, and national policy responses to the issue. Supporting statistical data was taken from the amnesty International reports, as well as obtained from a range of publications. Further information was obtained from literature, working papers and online journal articles.

*Data analysis.* Interviews, field observations and notes were analyzed by means of the Interpretative Phenomenological approach, which is based on the assumption that our knowledge of reality, including the domain of human action, is a social construction by human actors.\(^1\) It requires going beyond simply describing and explaining what phenomena is, and also ‘interpret’ social phenomena for the reader. The research should be built on the assumption that humans learn about reality from the meanings they assign to it, such as language, consciousness, shared experience, publications, tools and other artifacts, while taking into consideration constantly changing nature of

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the social phenomena\(^1\). Reconciliation theory and Political Culture studies are utilized to form the theoretical framework for the approach. It is important to notice that the former one came out of the simple event observation and was used as a grounded theory to generate a set of concepts from the field data,\(^2\) whereas the latter was identified in the process of deeper event analysis and as one variable of the reconciliation theory concept. As my primary sources comparably limited and unsystematically collected they will not be organized in the separate chapter. The information will be added to the secondary data analysis.

In order to address last research objective, to define if there is a window of opportunity for the reconciliation in the near future, I will use the method of positive-negative impact analysis of external and internal factors. The method will be described in the regarding chapter.

**Limitations of the approach.** Conducting of interpretive research, I have experienced a number of limitations that had a negative influence on the research result:

- Limited time for the data collection and data analysis;
- Sensitiveness of the explored phenomenon caused some ethical issued and tensions making it difficult to conduct interviews, open dialogue can be harmful for the participants. In those cases I was always offering confidentiality to individuals I talked to.
- Language barrier (my disability to speak Thai) was one of the biggest limitations while conducting interviews and using the internet sources.
- Living in Thailand while conducting the research put me in an advantageous position giving me opportunity to conduct direct observation and interviews with local people, however, the access to the secondary data and number of internet resources was limited by the tough media censorship by the government.

In my case, this methodological approach does not serve to create a new theory, but rather uses the existing theories and concepts to facilitate the research on the given phenomena aiming to inform the reader on the political trends, national policies and operational context


in Thailand and provide a deeper understanding of the issue in the given time and space.

**Structure of the dissertation**
The research paper will consist of four main chapters. I will begin with the Theoretical Framework which aims to shed light on the notion of reconciliation and ways of its implementation, as well as political culture theory and its importance for the understanding of many political processes. Using the knowledge gained from the theoretical part, in the next chapters I will analyze Thai political system and the role of the monarchy in it in order to provide a better understanding of the grievances behind symbolic issues. This will followed by the research of the government’s response to the political crisis, in particular, the actions undertaken under the reconciliation plan, as well as other initiatives and actions that can be important for me to achieve the research goal. The last section seeks to answer the guiding research questions, namely, what would be the right way to address the conflict in Thai society in order to achieve long-term reconciliation in Thai society and if it is possible already today or a least in the near future.

**Spelling**
As there is no standard for the Romanized spelling of Thai names and words, a variety of spelling can be encountered. I have generally respected the way Thai authors write their own names in English, even if this is usually a literal rendering rather than according to pronunciation. But for Thai words rather than personal names I was trying to follow the pronunciation method.
I. Theoretical Framework

As it was already mention in introductive part, after more than two months of demonstrations in the Thai capital, that escalated to the violent conflict between different political groups, the rest of the of the year 2010 passed under the government’s slogan of peace restoration and reconciliation in the society. In order to be able to analyze the actions of the Abhisit’s government, the proclaimed and hidden goals and results, it is necessary to address the notion of reconciliation from theoretical point of view. My aim in this part of the project is to address the term ‘reconciliation’ and some of the deep confusion that still surrounds it, and its practice. I will review some of the ongoing debates and skepticism around the concept, from scholarship as well as policy and practice. I make the important distinction between interpersonally-based understandings of reconciliation, and a pragmatic approach of ‘political reconciliation’. The result might be a more practical base on which to reduce confusion to more manageable level, to place reconciliation more centrally in the overall post-violent reconstruction process and to develop its feather implication to my case study. Yet from the very beginning I should notice that despite rather big amount of literature concerned with theory and practice of ‘reconciliation’, most of it is tought by western scholars, supporters of globalist and neo-liberal ideologies. This fact has to be taken into consideration while applying the theory to the case study. However, at this stage I merely raise questions and possibilities about the nature of this base.

Going forward, it is important to note, that in the process of gaining knowledge about reconciliation, I realized that also the concept of political culture should be addressed as it seems to play a significant role in the process of reconciliation. Therefore the political culture theory will make up the second part of this chapter. I will offer different definitions of ‘political culture’ and its classifications, and the limitations of the theory.

Reconciliation

The term ‘reconciliation’ although being known long before, has been conceptualized and gained its popularity on the political arena after the end of the apartheid regime in South Africa and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was formed to unify society. The TRC
is considered to be one of the symbols of the South Africa’s change to liberty\(^1\). By devoting attention to apartheid victims and perpetrators and by formulating of vision for the future, the Commission embodied the entire transitional process. Because the worldwide media attention it has received and the recognition it has gained in South Africa itself, the TRC have become widely regarded as a model how society can deal with traumatic past. It was taken as an instructive example in many other post conflict countries, like Sierra Leone or Indonesia. Reconciliation has emerged as one of the master narratives of the late twentieth century as individuals and entire nations struggle to overcome the legacies of suffering of different kind. The term has become part of standard lexicon of strategies for assisting societies experienced a violent conflict. It is now on the lips and in the agendas of all branches of the international community. Nationally, too, in conflict situations, sections of society or of government demand reconciliation initiatives as part of an agreement, or as part of the post-agreement reform process. Yet despite its generally acknowledged importance and popularity, there remains great disagreement over what reconciliation actually means and, in particular, how it relates to other concepts and processes, such as justice, peace-building, democratization and political development. “Reconciliation is a theme with deep psychological, sociological, theological, philosophical, and profoundly human roots – and nobody really knows how to successfully achieve it”\(^2\)

Let me start with effort to define reconciliation in it’s the most common sense. Generally speaking ‘reconciliation’ describes coming together; it is an antithesis of falling or growing apart\(^3\). Yet unlike its relative, ‘conciliation’, reconciliation connotes the coming together of things that once were united but have been torn asunder. From this definition reconciliation seems to be very simple and the most natural thing in the world. However it has many dimensions and can be seen as a spiritual idea, psychological need, social movement or political imperative; it can be process and goal.

The lack of agreement as to what reconciliation means presents both conceptual and pragmatic challenges. People don’t know what to expect

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from governmental programs, promising reconciliation. Politicians do not know what promises are reasonable to make, or what steps are necessary to meet those promises. Social scientists do not know whether the programs have worked and when reconciliation is accomplished. As a political matter, people use this single word to describe different levels of recovery – from personal healing to community rebuilding, national stability and international peace. At the conceptual level, reconciliation is associated with justice, truth, forgiveness. However the conventional understandings of the term – which tend to be backward looking and stress interpersonal relationships – are not very much help in explaining what reconciliation can contribute to the successful transformation. The reasons behind that are controversial relationships between the reconciliation and some other concepts and ideas.

To begin with the fact the reconciliation can be thought as a static item that either exist in the society or not, or a goal; or rather as a process that continually evolving. John Paul Lederach, for example, understands reconciliation to be “dynamic, adaptive processes aimed at building and healing”, and “a process of change and redefinition of relationships1.” For Audrey Chapman, “national reconciliation can best be understood as a multi-dimensional and long-term process”2. While Daniel Bar-Tal and Gemma Bennink, while acknowledging ‘reconciliation’ as a process, also see it as an outcome, an end-state which ‘consists of mutual recognition and acceptance, invested interests and goals in developing peaceful relations, mutual trust, positive attitudes, as well as sensitivity and consideration for the other party’s needs and interests’3. This confusion raises the resistance to reconciliation, especially among victim groups. The reason for that is that people usually do not differentiate between the two possible definitions: that they are suspicious of a process because of their suspicions about an end-state. In other words, they rightly suspect a process that might compel them into an end-state which they do not necessarily want. They may be

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forced to make compromises and, in particular, to ‘forgive’ perpetrators without having first gained sufficient justice for their suffering.

The next contradiction appears from the notion of ‘truth’ and its relationships with reconciliation. The South African TRC with its slogan: “Truth: the Road to Reconciliation” insists on a dispensability of the truth because it disinfects the wounds, helps people to heal\(^1\). But depending on what actually constitutes the truth, if it is just the facts that happened and can be proven forensically, or does the truth entail complex narrative. It can be even argued the truth actually impedes reconciliation, because it can be so terrible, that attitudes harden and forgiveness is all but impossible.

Not less complex is the relationship between reconciliation and justice. Most of the scholars agree on the centrality of justice to reconciliation. Joseph Montville sees justice as “the most fundamental element of peace.”\(^2\) But there have been problems, too. Just a few years ago, Pankhurst could still comment accurately: “No common understanding has yet emerged of the political conditions under which efforts at reconciliation should be restrained and justice promoted, or vice versa, in order to achieve the ‘best’ peace”\(^3\). The remark ‘or vice versa’ shows that there is a trade-off between one instrument and its opposing other. To avoid such a contradiction one can use more complex definition of justice. Reconciliation and justice are not oppositional, if justice is defined multidimensionally, to include not only crime-and-punishment but also the restoration of broken relationships and the underpinning of equality of treatment. However, in times of transition the link between justice and reconciliation becomes the most critical, and the question of what to do with perpetrators comes up. Especially in the post-violence context, most of the victims far from want to share any of their needs or satisfiers with the opposition, they simply want to see their own needs met and perpetrators punished. In this case, justice remains simply a system of crime and punishment.

Another source of confusion stems from that contextual variance. Much of the thinking, vocabulary, and approach has been drawn from an

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\(^1\) Verdoolaege, A. Reconciliation discourse: the case of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.-p.6


initially individual context and then applied more broadly at the community, or national, level. In some cases, this is a useful borrowing of terms. But in others, it is far from helpful. We should be very careful in extrapolating too directly from interpersonal to national. The pragmatists prioritize the social and political needs of a post-violence society. “Political reconciliation is not dependent on the kind of intimacy that religions and some forms of individual reconciliation may demand. Rather, statecraft and politics require peaceful coexistence... Forgiveness may come later, after the creation of confidence and the building of trust”¹. Clear understanding of this distinction opens the possibility to look at reconciliation from absolutely different prospective, as related to political arena, specifically to democracy-building. Reconciliation is “a necessary requirement for the long-term survival of democracy”²; unreconciled relationships, those built on distrust can effectively and eventually destroy any political system even if it is based on respect for human rights and democratic structures”³. In the IDEA Handbook edited by David Bloomfield, many examples are given to prove this statement. Michelle Parlevliet, for example, draws similar conclusions from her study of Namibia, where the government, “embarked on a policy of reconciliation that rejected any analysis of the past”. “Despite all efforts from the Namibian government to ignore it, the violations of the past and the related call for accountability have surfaced again and again”⁴.

However, this approach is not the only one in the debates about political reconciliation. Erin Daly and Jeremy Saskin are talking about reconciliation as being fundamentally about accommodation⁵. It is about accepting the right of others in the state to have differing views which, ideally, should be recognized and even welcomed as a part of national debate. This often means that transitional governments need to invite and respect views and attitudes of the groups for which they have no natural affinity. In their book “Reconciliation in divided societies: finding a common ground” they are trying to re-conceptualize reconciliation in a way that is relevant for the nations in transitions.

² Ibidem.
³ Ibidem.- p.168
They argue that the more structural understanding of ‘reconciliation’ will be more useful for divided nations: rather than focusing on ‘truth’ and ‘forgiveness’, transitional governments are advised to spend their limited capital creating political and economic structures that are rooted in the needs of the particular society at that time, but that are inclusive enough that all the people within the polity are able to participate in the public life on an equal footing. Reconciliation is seen as a process that can only be achieved by regulating social interactions through the rule of law and preventing certain forms of violation of rights from happening again. Indeed, transitions are most likely to be successful where the feeling exist that turning back is impossible. The provision of the basic needs is another aspect of successful reconciliation process. Material deprivation can impair efforts to promote reconciliation. As Graeme Simpson, the founder of the Centre for the study of violence and reconciliation, has noted, “we can rebuild social fabric and negotiate political settlement; but unless we meet people economic needs, those agreements are worse very little.”

Moreover, according to Erin Daily and Jeremy Saskin, dispute resolution can be considered as a basic need, because the lack of capacity from the side of governmental institutions to regulate competition and resolve the dispute, means that individuals and groups may try to fulfill these functions through violence. The authors are convinced that this structural understanding of reconciliation is likely, in long run, to be more effective at the securing peace and sustainability within the society. It can be best thought of as a tool for transformation, but only if it is properly understood within the relevant society: its meaning must be clearly articulated within a specific political and historical context.

It comes clear from the analysis of the literature on the reconciliation theory, that most of the scholars associated the processes of political reconciliation with the building of ‘just’ society and political democratization with its components, such as inclusiveness, accountability, political pluralism, freedom of expression and fair competition. This approach put significant limitations on potential success of the policy of reconciliation. And those limitations can only be overcome if the conflict is understood in the given time and space, namely, political culture and present situation in the particular country should be taken into consideration. Indeed, many scholars see the link

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between reconciliation after the conflict and political culture, as the latest can provide important insights into the causes of violence in particular settings. Explaining dynamics of conflict and competition at the state level, for example, can be facilitated with an understanding of notions of rank and status in the society, and electoral campaigning or symbolism used in the given country. Combined approach capture well the difficulty in bringing to resolution a conflict where the state is dominant, facing disempowered insurgency, and where both parties see little value in entering negotiations.

**Political Culture**

In order to address the notion of political culture, we need to look at the field of comparative politics. There are three theoretical schools within it: the rational choice theories, the culturalist approaches as well as the structural analyses. In this section of the paper I will address the culturalist approach within comparative politics. The theory of political culture has many inquiries: among others it tries to explain electoral turnout, change in political behavior, and economic growth and etc.

To begin with I will offer different definitions of ‘political culture’ and its different classifications, and then show how change in political culture can be measured and presents two different techniques for measuring values.

In the field of communist studies, where the concept of political culture has most frequently been operationalized, the majority of scholars have opted for the combined subjective and behavioral approach. However, there are as many definitions as auditors who employ the concept. In his study on Soviet Union Stephen White defines political culture as attitudinal and behavioral matrix within which the political system is located. Here political culture is made up of three components: political values, attitudes and behavior. Political value can be defined as idealized norms of how a proper political system should be structured and operated. Political attitudes on the other side are the reality based orientations of the people towards the political process. And finally, political behavior is the way individuals or groups apply their political values and attitudes in concrete situations.

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1 Macqueen B. Political Culture and Conflict Resolution in the Arab Middle East: Lebanon and Algeria. Academic Monographs, 2009 – p. 9
2 Ebel, R.H., Taras R., D. Cochrane J.D. Political culture and foreign policy in Latin America: case studies from the Circum-Caribbean. SUNY Press, 1991 – p.8
According to Almond and Verba landmark studies of political culture, the Civic Culture, a society’s political culture is the set of ‘attitudes toward the political system and its various parts, and attitudes toward the role of the self in the system’\(^1\) held by its members. Just couple of years later Verba gives another definition. Political Culture was seen as ‘the system of empirical beliefs, expressive symbols, and values which define the situation in which political actions takes place\(^2\).’ Here the author illustrated the limited abilities of the term ‘attitudes’ to characterize the components of political culture. In his 1990 book-length study, Inglehart defines culture as ‘a system of attitudes, values and knowledge that is widely shared within a society and transmitted from generation to generation.’ Thus the term ‘attitudes’ appears again, whereas the behavioral component is missing, plus in this definition political culture is considered to be stable and long-lasting phenomenon. Latest, I believe, is very important because it is what makes culture different from ideology.

Indeed, an important distinction needs to be made between political culture and political ideology. Commonly accepted, that culture denotes the more deeply imprinted patterns of a society, those attitudes, values and beliefs that have been ingrained in a population from earliest childhood. Thus they are persistent, long-lasting and slower to change. An ideology, on the opposite, is ‘a set of opinions and views that an individual or group may come to as a result of mature ratiocination.’\(^3\) Thus culture is stronger and generally more durable than ideology. On a long term scale, ideology can contribute to the formation or change of nation’s political culture. Competing ideologies can create or reinforce various political subcultures within a nation. However, in the situation when culture and ideology are at odds, culture usually tends to prevail over ideology.

It is possible to identify some common ideas about what most of the political culturalists accept about the term. Political culture theory defines political culture in this four-fold way:

- It consists of the set of subjective orientations to politics in a national population or subset of a national population.

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\(^2\) Ibidem

\(^3\) Ebel, R.H., Taras R., D. Cochrane J.D. Political culture and foreign policy in Latin America: case studies from the Circum-Caribbean. SUNY Press, 1991 – p.10
- It has cognitive, affective and evaluative components; it includes knowledge and beliefs about political reality, feelings with respect to politics, and commitments to political values.
- The content of political culture is the result of childhood socialization, education, media exposure, and adult experiences with governmental, social and economic performance.
- Political culture affects political and governmental structure and performance—constrains it.

Political culture varies from country to country. But it is also important to recognize that even within a single nation there usually a degree of cultural diversity. Different social sectors may have distinctive political values and they behave in a specific way in the political arena. Thus political culture may include a number of political subcultures. In addition, the dominant value system, based on national traditions and the consensual norms found throughout society, exist apart from sectoral distinctions. For example, numerous studies show that elites hold quite different beliefs and orientations than non-elites in the same society. Moreover, equally strong evidence indicates that elites act upon their beliefs more often and more effectively than non-elites, creating so called a dominant culture. However, there is a belief that in a healthy political system, which respects diversity and impose broad guidelines on every member of society, can accommodate those differences. And in this case, national political culture is the end product of the interaction between diverse subcultures. In the situation when regional, religious, ethnic or other subcultures become so different, that no national culture seems to exist, political stability in the country is likely to be threatened.

A change in objective conditions can produce changes in political culture. For example, as citizens of the countries became more educated, affluent and urban, they began to demand a more open political system, forcing their authoritarian governments to democratize. Historical factors, particularly dramatic events, such as wars, violent conflicts, as well as international influence, can also alert the political culture.

Therefore one of the main challenges in applying the theory of political culture is that it can be misunderstood or wrong estimated. Assuming that national political culture exists in the country one should not

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underestimate the importance of diverse subcultures within it. Similarly, the fact that political culture can be an explanatory factor should not lead the researcher to overlook that objective conditions within the country can be responsible for behavior, often attributed to the culture.

Another problem while using the cultural theory is high number of components that the concept includes. The challenge of weaving many different psychological orientations together is heightened by the nature of the definitions of political culture. In line with their intent to use political culture as a systemic variable, scholars have defined it in comprehensive terms, as ‘all the important ways in which a person is oriented.¹’ In practice, however, empirical analyses rarely incorporate more than a few aspects of any definition of political culture and therefore can shed only partial light on this multifaceted phenomenon.

Having in mind those particular limitations, I will move to the theory itself and to begin with I will explain how according to the political culture concept individuals in the country acquire the values and attitudes that constitute their political culture.

Ethridge and Handelman² in their study on politics in changing world call the process of shaping and transmitting of political culture as political socialization. It involves the transfer of political values from generation to generation and in a long term produces changes that can lead to a transformation of national political culture.

Agents of political socialization can be individuals, groups, organizations or institution, whose importance varies from country to country. Ethridge and Handelman argue family and educational institutions, especially schools as the most important agents of socialization in early years of life, while different peer groups influence people’s value in their adult years. Among those agents can be friends and work colleagues. Their impact is claimed to be especially strong in economically developed societies, where the influence of family elders or religion weakens³. Moreover in industrialized societies, mass media is playing the role of an important agent of political socialization. The great proportion of the population receive their values from newspapers, magazines, and especially radio and television. The spread

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³ Ibidem. P.70
of television in many countries has tended to homogenize political culture, to reduce regional and rural-urban differences. In the last decades Internet has also become a major source of political ideas and values, particularly among young educated adults.

Another groups of political socialization agents can be called ‘secondary groups’, among them business associations, religious groups, labor unions and military. The most important objective that make these agents different from those mentioned before, is that people usually join those organizations for common goal. Unlike family, schools or media the role of these agents is not to influence member’s values, rather to promote common ideas. Yet each of these groups may exert substantial influence on their members. It can be made directly, when, for example, business groups distribute material to their members with the critic on government interference in the economy; or indirectly, like religious leaders promoting patriarchal, therefor male-dominant, family values.

The research on political culture is not limited by only description of different knowledge, values and attitude, the culturalists go beyond that and explore relations between political culture and democracy, political culture and political stability. They examined the capability of a nation’s values with desired political goals. During this process several types of categorization of political culture were elaborated.

One of the most popular ways to describe country’s political culture is by analyzing cultural prerequisites for democracy. The culturalists distinguish between democratic and authoritarian political cultures. Democratic order is most likely to emerge in the society where diverse points of view are tolerated, including unpopular and dissenting opinions. Some important components of democratic political culture include accommodation, modernization, system loyalty and trust. Survey researches indicate that when the level of trust in the country is low, members of the society are ‘more likely to support repression of fellow citizens with unpopular points of view, more likely to evade taxes, and less likely to extend business credit, thereby inhibiting democracy and economic growth,’¹ that could be the components of opposing, authoritarian political culture. According to Ethridge and Handelman most of the counties of developing world don’t possess long-established democratic tradition. Authoritarian political culture

stresses the importance of stability and order, it is less tolerant to the dissent, ethnic or religious minorities or opposing political viewpoints, at what is important that not only from above, but also from below. One example can be taken from both South and North Korea, where many citizens believe that journalist have no right to publish materials that contradicts the country's prevail ideology as it can threaten stability in the society\(^1\). Another important characteristic of authoritarian culture is a common believe that national leader know better what is good for the country and society and should be obeyed, that population's obedience without severe critic on the government policy is much easier to achieve. Many culturalists also make link between the dominant religion in the county and its inclination to one or another political culture, saying for example, that Protestant nations are most likely to have democratic political culture, Islamic nations are least likely.

Two political traditions are not necessarily mutually exclusive categories; they can coexist in one society. In most cases it can be applied to the nations in transitions. During the transition period, political culture is confronted with reverse representations and values, and individuals are engaged in the actual learning process of new type of political conduct. The new institutional structures that can emerge in the process sometimes need in-depth change in behavior, psychocultural and mental patterns that need to be learned and fully understood. Fulga, in his book ‘Social change and Political Culture,’ call this process of rethinking values in the society as ‘political resocialization’\(^2\)

There are some other ways to classify the cultures: for example, according to their degree of consensus or conflict over crucial political issues. Some authors distinguish capitalist, revolutionary, Marxist political cultures.

I will not go deeper in there for the reason, that for this particular research I would mostly rely on the first categorization that is concerned with the degree of democratization in society. But before proceeding to the analysis of the political culture in Thailand, I would like to look at the criticism on the theory and its implication. That would help me to escape common mistakes and to get more objective results.

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\(^2\) Fulga G. Social change and political culture. Editions de l'ULG, 2005. – p.19
One significant critic is that survey research on political values and beliefs sometimes uses questions that are not meaningful in other cultures or are translated into terms that have different meanings in different languages. Another problem that accompanies the theory is that it has implicit cultural and ideological bias. Carole Pateman has argued for example, that ‘The Civic Culture’ was based on the assumption that British-American-style democracy is the ideal form of government and consequently that political cultures throughout the world should be judged by the degree to which they support that form of democracy\(^1\). In my case this criticism need to be taken with special attention as I am going to analyze Thai political culture with its relation to democratic values. To some extent, this problem can be addressed by more careful selection of variables within the political culture concept. Perhaps the most telling criticism of political culture theory is that quite often it is imprecise and fails to explain or predict the important political changes. Moreover, political culture frequently becomes a fallback explanation for anything that scientists are unable to explain by other means. These criticisms indicate that some culturalist researches and explanations are weak. Thus using the political culture theory for my research I need to be careful and not to overstretch the theory and should not use my own political values, or political values of other countries as measuring stick for evaluating the situation in Thailand.

II. Thai Political Culture

Thai political culture is characterized by a myriad of different expressions. This can be seen in the varying processes and norms that applied for the selection of leaders, from village level up through district to national level. Or it can be seen in how institutions such as political parties or representative elections are conceptualized by different social groups. It may also be gauged from the difficulty often seen in maintaining the rule of law and formal functioning of state institutions, particularly at more local levels.

This particular research is based on the ideas that came from my observations of the demonstrations that took place at the beginning of last year. And although there are many reasons behind the political instability, obviously, it is struggle between old and new, between notions of authority, leadership and legitimacy and existence of European inspired political institutions, separation of powers, and distinction of private from public and the organization of representation in political parties within electoral democracy. In this context it is reasonable to use one of the most popular ways to describe country’s political culture, namely, by analyzing cultural prerequisites for democracy. To do so, it is necessary to define particular input and output factors that can be described and analyzed. After living in Thailand for some months, and traveling around the country, it is possible to identify particular attributes of Thai culture and behavior that can be later put in the correlation with the factors that predetermined them. Using the method of observation and being familiar with Thai history, I have come up with the following criteria that can influence Thai political culture:

- Religion is the first that catches one's eyes when he comes to Thailand, whenever he goes, he will see temples, spirit houses, people praying and monks, so respected by all members of the society;

- Thailand political system is a constitutional monarchy but unlike, for example, Great Britain, where the Queen is just the national symbol, Thai King has much more influence and held sacred in society; his special privileges are provided by national constitution. Thus Thai political tradition and the role of monarchy need to be analyzed;
• Despite the great influence of the King, the existence of all political institutions that accompany democratic order should not be overlooked;
• Finally, great economic development, political crisis and later recover that Thailand experienced in the past decades also can play in important role in formation of values, attitude and behavior of Thai people.

Political Tradition

‘Chat, satana, phramahakasat’ or ‘Nation, Religion, King’ in English translation, a patriotic slogan coined by King Vajiravudh\(^1\), shortly after his accession, to inculcate “devotion to Fatherland, Nation, and our Holy Religion”\(^2\)

This patriotic slogan, praising the ‘three fundamental institutions’, aptly summarizes the political tradition that sanctions and sustains the bureaucratic policy. The veneer of an idealized past covers up the reality of rule by military-bureaucratic factions, maintained by the periodic use of force. Yet despite its appeal to the Thai past, even from the conservative point of view, the words ‘Nation’, ‘Religion’ and ‘King’ can be interpreted differently spanning the old and the new, local ideas and those imported from the West. According to the paternalist idea of the King Vajiravudh, ‘Nation’ symbolizes the unity of leader and people. However it also represents the democratic concept of the will of the people, expressed during parliamentary interludes, since the downfall of absolute monarchy in Thailand in 1932 and change to the constitutional system. ‘Religion’, too, has different meaning for different people, or more accurate, for various groups and strata of society. In the strict sense, the Buddhist tradition is one of detachment from the material sphere, but the Buddhist hierarchy itself has been integrated into the secular administration in the course of political centralization. In an analytical sense, Thai Buddhism, emphasizing meritorious action and individual responsibility, can be placed at the spiritual end of spectrum of values, while “lay” values, which serve to maintain the social hierarchy, are at the expedient end. In practice the ‘cosmological design’ of authority and administration does not distinguish between territorial and functional organization, or civil and military, or secular

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\(^1\) King Vajiravudh was the sixth monarch of Siam (Thailand) under the House of Chakri, ruling from 1910 until his death in 1925, known as a father of Thai nationalism.

and religious. This results in a ‘totalization’. The drahma, the moral law, according to Hindu and Buddhist concepts, of kingship should ideally encompass and order society morally, politically, and economically. Much of this traditional, unified way of thinking has persisted to the present. “The Buddhist way of life is an integral part of Thai national life.” These traditionalist attitudes inevitably sanction the type of authority that promotes and sustains such values. Even the trepidation and respect evoked by the ‘King’ among Thai people, especially in the rural areas, is only dimly reflected in the actual experience of the dynasty in the twenties and beginning of the twenty-first centuries. Yet, before turning to the description of the institute of monarchy, I would like to look at the influences that European countries exerted over Thailand.

**Western Influence of the Formation of Thai Political Tradition**

The western intervention in the region of Southeast Asia in the 19th century played an important role in the political and economic development of Thailand. Although Thailand unlike many other countries of the region was not colonized, some scholars in this case talking about ‘indirect colonization’. The direct colonization was done mainly in two ways, first, by converting largely self-efficient economy into a dual one with one traditional part and another one – commercialized, oriented on the world market; second, by replacement of an arbitrary political authority by a colonial, centralized, functionally differentiated bureaucratic state. Partially in order to escape colonization, partially to get better economic opportunities, Thai elite adopted certain practices of colonialism, such as employing foreign experts at the highest level of administration from the beginning of 1890s. As a result, the government organized in a western manner, exerted for the first time fairly effective and continuing control over both central and outlying areas, while an important part of economy was integrated into the international capitalist system. Subsequently, so it is argued, the country's leaders during the period of colonial-style tutelage came to perform the function of dependent elite.

From that time on, the development of Thai political system very often was characterized by transfer of Western democratic political institutions to the Thai ground, yet too often without adaptation to the

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2 Ibidem. – p. 36
conditions of the country and its traditions that, in its turn, led to failure of those institutions to provide the functions they supposed to carry.

The Role of Monarchy in the Political Life of Thailand

Past. The Thai monarchy has been characterized throughout almost eight hundred years long history by contrasts. The early informal, patriarchal style, which was based on personal relations, was different from the later bureaucratic concept of the eulogized head of the state ruling through an elaborate administrative apparatus. The absolutist theory of an all-powerful chao chivit, ‘lord of life’, contrasted with the reality of a balance of power of king, princes and nobility.

The life of the thirteenth century ruler of Sukhothai, Ramkhamhaeng, illustrated the kingly ideal of the brave, wise and compassionate ‘father of his people’, his power personality maintained the kingdom of Sukhothai. After his death, much of the areas under his control were lost and after a long struggle for survival, Sukhothai defeated in 1378 and was forced to take the oath of allegiance to new, centralizing, hierarchic, ‘Indianized’ dynasty of Ayuthaya and by the fifteenth century was entirely integrated in the kingdom1. At the same time the bureaucratic culture was consolidated by grading in minute detail the ranks, duties, and privileges of every official.

The classical Indian ‘laws of Manu’ was assumed as a basis for Thai legislation. According to ancient Indian concept the function of the ruler was to harmonize activities on the earth with the cosmic forces of the universe. That was achieved by organizing the kingdom as a universe in miniature: the palace represented the sacred Mount Meru, while his four chief ministers corresponded to the guardian deities of the four cardinal points of the universe. Thus, the ceremonial structure, adopted by the king of Ayuthaya, and still used today, provided an aura of the sacred mingled with majesty. “Only the king is highest in the land, because he is god-like” stated a royal decree of the eighteenth century2.

Yet, the power of the monarch was arbitrary rather than absolute: it depended on personal qualities of the king as well as the strength or weakness of princes and nobles. The noble put and kept kings on the throne, and kings maintained the semblance of royal power only by carefully manipulating public appointments so as to balance the noble families against each other.

2 Ibidem - P.22
The Beginning of twenties century marked by the movement against monarchies around the world and the first world war, brought significant misbalance in the Thai society. The monopoly of power by the king and royal princes; the frustration of young, able, and ambitious people- especially those educated in England or France, and inspired with the ideas of democracy and industrial progress combined with tolerant and indecisive character of the King Prajadhipok; his policy of balancing the budget by reducing salaries and dismissing military and civilian officials gradually developed into the coup in 1932 that ended the system of absolute monarchy in Thailand. The coup, organized by the group of senior and junior army officers, navy officers and civilian officials, so called 'People's Party' was far from being democratic or mass movement. It was rather the replacement of personalities. However, the role of the king changed: the coup was launched with public declaration designed to convince the royals, that if they did not accede, the alternative would be republic: “ the king maintains his power above the law... he appoints court relatives and toadies without merit of knowledge to important positions, without listening to the voices of the people... The people's Party has no wish to snatch the throne. Hence it invites this king to retain the position. But he must be under the law of constitution for governing the country and cannot do anything independently without the approval of the assembly of people's representatives... if the king replies with the refusal... it will be regarded as a treason to the nation, and it will be necessary for the country to have a republican form of government”¹. The King abdicated in 1935 and for several decades the country felt under the military control.

The reign of the King Rama IX. The present King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX), the ninth monarch of Thailand under the House of Chakri, rules the country since June 1946 and is the longest-serving king in the history of Thailand. As a constitutional monarch pursuing political power in competition with modern elected government, King Bhumibol can be by right considered as to be something unique in the twenties century. Bhumibol was never even expected to become sovereign of Thailand. He was born in the United States and was raised in Switzerland and was familiar neither with the culture of his country of

¹ Handley P.M. The King Never Smiles: a Biography of Thailand’s Bhumibol Adulyadej. Yale University Press, 2006. – p.45
origin, nor with the Thai language. He succeeded the throne in the age of eighteen, after mysterious deaths of his elder brother King Ananda. He began at a time, when the monarchy counted for little in Thai politics. Displaced by the regimes that followed Thailand’s 1932 coup, the royal institution could easily have faded into either quaint irrelevance or even penurious oblivion in the decades after 1946. Instead, a series of accidents saw it prosper.

Referring to Montenese¹, these accidents included an uncommonly talented king with a solid educational foundation laid in Switzerland, a personal circle of advisors bent on the monarchy’s rescue, an excellent relationship between the palace and military commander Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat and the latter’s skill in harnessing the monarchy to development and security between 1958 and 1963 when he was occupying the office of the Prime Minister. Of the prime importance to the latest was the legitimizing power of the monarchy that traditionally received very high respect for its transcendent role: the king as a symbol of the nation, approached with an almost sacred awe by the mass of ordinary people. During that time the military dictatorship systematically boosted the monarchy in order to legitimate the Thai state, Sarit’s own power and the anti-communist struggle, in that way helping also the monarchy to revive its political significance and to get back into its perceived centrality to the nation and its affairs. By the late 1960s, the King was making regular public statements touching on political issues, and by the early 1970s was the most powerful figure in Thailand. Some Thais believed the King was ‘in a unique position to foster a variety of urgently needed governmental and social reforms’². Frustrated with the shortcomings of the military, bureaucratic and political leadership, he even supported the 1973 constitutional movement that resulted in an appointment of a new government and growing power of democrat forces. The monarch was the ultimate arbiter of political decisions in times of crisis; the monarchy was the primary source of national legitimacy; the King acted as a didactic commentator on national issues, helping to set the national agenda, especially through his annual birthday speeches; the monarch intervened actively in political developments. The following extract from official memoir of the King more or less reflected the sentiment of

Thai people vis-à-vis their monarch: “His dedication to the welfare of his people becomes so apparent and infectious for all people in all walks of life, and they respond to him and his generosity in and equally dedicated manner. In this way a link is formed between the King and his people who have steadily grown into a bond of mutual trust and affection. Wherever there is joy or celebration, the King is there to bless the joy and share in the celebration. Wherever there is a problem, the King is there to help look for a solution. Wherever there is distress or sorrow, the King is there to soothe, to assist, to strengthen. People thus become used to feel his presence in all instants of life. The King and the people become one. The Throne and the Nation become one, and the profound meaning is thus given to the Thai Throne”

Given the immense popularity and wisdom gained over more than 60 years of the reign, Thai monarchy enjoyed considerable influence. However, his official power is limited by the political order; therefore it is almost impossible to ensure domination. Accordingly, maintaining the prestige of the throne throughout the decades of military coups and changing governments and constitutions was one of the greatest challenges of the current reign. Monarchy had to operate cautiously: its relational power was a ‘situation-specific continuum’ The king’s ability to take an active role in Thailand’s politics long depended on his contact with a circle of talented, able and devoted people. This circle and the scope of its influence embody what Duncan McCargo has recognized as the country’s “network monarchy”.

According to McCargo, the period of 1974-1976 saw important constitutional development in Thailand; the elections in 1976 brought the democrats on the top. That made it almost impossible for Thailand to return to an absolute monarchy. The author suggest that emergence of network monarchy was a deliberate elite project aimed to create an alternative mode of operation, one in which the palace could continue operate through a mixture of direct and indirect interventions to influence country’s political direction. The idea was to create the network-based system that could be an alternative to hierarchical monarchy. In a hierarchical monarchy, the throne would gain credit for

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successes – but would also be blamed when matters went wrong. In a
network monarchy, the throne would gain credit for successes, but the
failures would be blamed on others – primarily on corrupt and self-
serving politicians. The King was acting largely through proxies such as
privy councilors\(^1\) and trusted military figures; and the lead proxy,
former army commander and Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanond, helped
determine the nature of coalition governments, and monitored the
process of military and other promotions. At heart, network governance
of this kind relied on placing the right people in the right jobs.
Allocation of key posts was the primary role of the lead proxy, Prem.
McCargo characterized the system as “an inherently illiberal, because it
advocates reliance on ‘good men’, and the marginalization of formal
political institutions or procedures”\(^2\). It has institutionalized a belief in
management of Thailand’s problems through discrete phone calls and
conversations among a small number of people.
After May 1992, when the popular demonstrations in Bangkok against
the government of General Suchinda Kraprayoon, who took the office in
a course of military coup in early 1991, and the bloody military
 crackdown that followed, changed subsequently the pattern of royal
interventions in Thai politics. As he grew older, the King appeared less
inclined to make direct personal interventions. Time to time arising
political legitimacy crises were addressed primarily through
interventions by Prem and other members of the Privy Council. The
frequency of monarchical interventions testified the difficulty of
sustaining the influence of the palace during an era of boom and bust.
Many experts believe that there was the time to realize the limits of the
monarchical power, reliant on an elderly circle of associates with
military background; and highlighted the need for a process of
thoroughgoing constitutional and political reform. However, all the
evidence suggests that the King himself failed to understand this.
Although there were attempts, particularly from royalist liberals such
as Ananad and Prawase, to reorient network monarchy in that
direction, rescuing the palace from the clutches of ultra-conservatives
and using it as a vehicle to promote political reform, it resulted in the

\(^1\) Privy Council is a body of appointed advisors to the monarch. According to Thai
Constitution the Council consists of no more than eighteen members, which appointment
and removal depend entirely on king. Its duty is to consult the king on all matters.
\(^2\) McCargo D. Network Monarchy and Legitimacy Crisis in Thailand. The Pacific Review,

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rise of an amazingly wealthy and powerful prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, who had his own vision of the policy.

Thaksin set about systematically to dismantle the political networks loyal to Prem in a wide range of sectors, aiming to replace them with his own supporters, associates and relatives. Thaksin was seeking to subvert network monarchy, and to replace it with a political economy network. Faced with a prime minister whose power and mandate were unprecedented, network monarchy had to pick its challenges carefully, and to mobilize all available resources to mount those challenges. Many scholars argue the military coup that overthrown Thaksin’s government was backed up and at least partially organized by the palace as the former Prime Minister represented a great threat to a whole informal political system of network monarchy that had operated in Thailand for three decades.

The latest outbreak of the ongoing political crisis, that happened in April-May 2010, which took lives of about 90 people and injured more than thousand, demonstrated inability or reluctance of the monarchy to interfere and stave off transformation of peaceful political demonstrations into bloody military crackdown. "Normally, the King would have intervened and averted the situation from escalating to the point it did. The King’s role in the past has indicated that he’s the circuit breaker in the Thai political process - a fundamental weakness in attempts to establish a democratic society" said Professor Damien Kingsbury, from Deakin University’s School of International and Political Studies to the Crikey reporter.

**Economic Change**

Since the mid-1980s, Thailand has experienced a period of remarkable economic growth and of accelerated integration into the global economy. The Kingdom’s economic performance at that time has been described as ‘virtually unparalleled’ with the value of total export growths at 18.1 per cent and the GDP a 9.6 per cent. The country’s industrial development was associated with a significant involvement of foreign investors and transnational corporations and in comparison to many other countries of the region with much lower degree of government interference. This development has been presented as

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1. Crikey, 'Where's the King? The monarchy asleep as Thailand burns', 20.05.2010, assessed on January 20, 2011
providing a “new model of development”. Handley has summarized this view, saying that for economists, development agencies and international development specialists, ‘Thailand’s for years of double digit growth represents the success of decades of deregulation and the honing of investment codes to produce one of the most user-friendly environments among developing countries.’

Such a ‘deregulation’ model was very much in line with the popular at that time neo-liberal orthodoxy and the ‘Thai economic miracle’ has been seen as primarily the result of application of the ‘correct’ state policy.

Yet, the economic crisis of 1997 and subsequent recovering process shaded the light on the pitfalls and short-sightedness of the system, as it appeared very much vulnerable to the external economic shocks and sudden changes, when the country lost most of its investors, many banks, both private and state-owned, and manufactures bankrupted. Moreover, the lack of governmental control over the economy led to extremely uneven development in many spheres. The former leading technocrat, Puey Ungphakorn, admitted that as an official he had concentrated too much on growth and not enough on the equitable distribution of the national product: “If we pay too much attention to social justice, overall growth would be slowed down; therefore we should put economic development first. Even though the rich will get richer, and the poor get poorer, soon growth will filter own to the poor automatically... we have used this method for 20-30 years now without success”

The social consequences of modernization without development revealed the widening gap between rich and poor, elite and masses, rural and urban, the ever-greater concentration of political and economic power in Bangkok is draining the resources of the rest of the country. Indeed, while the pattern in which one very large city dominates the national economy is common to many developing countries, Thailand demonstrates these features at their most extreme. In terms of measures of urban primacy Bangkok is certainly one of the most primate cities in the world, and the national pattern of urbanization extremely uneven. The city dominates the Thai economy and its interaction with the international economy to the extent that it is often asserted that ‘Bangkok is Thailand.’

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advantageous regarding work opportunities and higher salaries, access to education, including higher education, political participation. The resulting expansion of bureaucratic tasks and demand for professional expertise, development and growth of manufacturing has created extrabureaucratic forces in the society which no longer accepted their subordinate role. Other important consequence of the spread of modernization was that wealth has greatly increased in the scale of values, as the Thai people became to perceive money and other forms of wealth or property as the most desirable aspect of life. Wealth could from that time on produce status, and not other way around as it was in the past. Yet, it is not the achievement of making money that is respected, but having money and using it. The latter can be seen as one of the reasons why the behavior of the elite and urbanized middle strata is still far from the rational calculation of long-term costs and benefits of promoted at the moment development.

To sum up, it would be simplification to refer Thai political culture to either authoritarian or democratic tradition. Thailand today is as much an on-going political transformation as it is an outgrowth of the subcontinent’s political soil or the simple product of a political system largely imported from the West. It includes characteristics of both and should be understood as the sum total of the historically formed rules, new appeared conceptions and norms that inform political life in contemporary Thailand.
To begin with, institutions of the monarchy and the Buddhist religion are still of the prime importance in the country, although more in formation of political ideology than in providing actions. King is a main symbol of the national unity and prosperity. In the past this authority was held by king and patron, today it is the authority of bureaucratic state. In all the times, the essential harmony of the state and religion, ruler and subject, center and provinces, is taken for granted. Today’s Thai political culture continues to accept the role of the supernatural. Tradition also manifests itself in pragmatic, customary attitudes of respect of elders, dependence on influential or powerful individuals, and an emphasis on personal relations rather than principles. Very important political development of the second half of the 20th century is increased influence of the monarch in the country, which was achieved through creation of so called network monarchy.
Yet the traditional consensus, based on paternalism, with the perception of the leader as a head of the family, and the people as children, respectful and obedient, has been slowly disrupted by the magnitude of contemporary social and economic change. The development and growth of industrial, commercial and service sectors have created a business community, ‘extrabureaucratic’ forces in Thai society. Thai citizens, particularly in Bangkok and the larger towns, are increasingly exposed to political campaigns, a more competitive career outlook, and new forms of economic behavior. The evident tension is a result of traditional values that still persist. And pervade the attitudes and activities of government, although the conditions that gave rise to them have long since passed.

If three decades ago, it was fair to say, that although the middle class exist in Thailand, it was still very small, and neither strong enough nor united enough to provide any significant changes in the political order in the country; today we can talk about much bigger and more goal oriented part of population ready to straggle against corrupted bureaucratic system for more just society. Together with the fact that one of the most popular Kings of Thailand grew already old and cannot play on the political arena as active as before, the current situation represent the clash of cultures, traditional bureaucratic and new democratic one. This observation can be helpful in explaining why the political actors use one or another means and what is the reason of particular behavior of the people.
III. Reconciliation road map

Reconciliation Initiative
On May, 3, in a move aimed at ending a two month protests and constantly facing calls for dissolution of the parliament and call for new elections, Thailand’s Prime Minister Abhisit has proposed in a live speech on all television channels to hold November 14 elections under a new reconciliation plan. “I am confident that it will not take too long to bring back peace to our society,” said Abhisit in a nationally televised address. “The government will be ready for an election once the country is peaceful.”1 But he also listed a number of conditions that would have to be met for elections to take place. A five-point reconciliation roadmap proposed on May 3, 2010, by PM Abhisit Vejjajiva to resolve the political problem based on the views and grievances from all groups in Thai society could be summarized as follows2:

- First of all, the monarchy should not be dragged into politics or violated: To protect the monarchy from being drawn into the present conflict, all Thais should work together to uphold and promote a correct understanding about the institution, given the various contributions which the King and other members of the Royal Family have made to the nation. The public should also help prevent any media from violating the revered institution;
- Next one was resolving social injustice: The Royal Thai Government (RTG) must undertake systematic and structural reformation of Thai welfare system to be able to deal with the problems of social and economic injustice at the national level. The process of reconciliation or national reform supposed to draw all sectors of society together to help resolve these problems by coming up with concrete measures and assessable targets of increasing income levels and creating opportunities for the people;
- The third calls for an independent body to monitor media to ensure unbiased reporting: The media must have freedom, but such freedom should be regulated by an independent

1 The New York Times, ‘Thai Prime Minister Offers New Deal to Protesters That Includes Early Elections’, 3.05.2010, assessed on December 27, 2010
mechanism in order to ensure that they are not misused to create conflict and hatred, thereby leading to violence. The Prime Minister argued that, if the media could operate in a constructive manner, then Thai society would be able to overcome conflict and return swiftly to normalcy and harmony;

- For peace to prevail the society must live together on the basis of the truth, therefore the fourth condition was the setting up of a fact-finding committee to investigate recent political violence to handle the investigation and to seek out the truth for society.
- And the fifth was a possible, unspecified constitutional amendment: The Prime Minister announced that it was a high time to put all issues on the table to set up a mechanism to solicit views from all sides to bring about justice for those involved in the political conflict and all groups in society, so that they would no longer lead to rejection of the political process and conflict in the future.

In his speech Abhisit also mention that he would proceed with his reconciliation plan that includes afore-mention five elements even if the so called Red Shirt protesters occupying central Bangkok rejected it, but in that case the process could be delayed and a clear election timeframe might not be determined.\(^1\)

One of the anti-government protest leaders, Jatuporn Prompan said in the interview with Reuters, that he was encouraged by the offer but that it contrasted with recent military and government statements warning the red shirts to end their campaign. He assured they will consider the plan but feather talks would be needed\(^2\): “We need to negotiate and find a middle ground”. Unfortunately, soon it became obvious that compromise would not be reached and clashes continued. Tensions ramped up when Major General Khattiya Sawasdipol - a renegade general better known as Seh Daeng, which means Red Commander - was shot and wounded by a sniper's bullet on May, 13 leaving him in critical condition. In a televised address on May, 15, Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva said a small group of protesters among the opposition "Red Shirts" was trying to foment civil war. "The government proposed a reconciliation plan but it was rejected," Abhisit

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1. 9&10News,'Thai PM offers reconciliation plan, election date’, 3.05.2010, assessed on December 27, 2010.
2. Reuters, 'Thai November elections proposed', video, 3.05.2010, assessed on January 5, 2011
said. "This benefits no one. It only benefits a small group which wants to harm the country and lead it to civil war. It is unbelievable that they use people's lives for political advantage."\(^1\) In the next few days military was stepping up their security measures. On May 18, Thai troops entered protest's camps, ending a tense standoff that has troubled the capital for more than two months. The army surged into Lumpini Park, the area where Red Shirt demonstrators had amassed. After hours of intense street battles, the Red Shirt leadership surrendered. According to the data available on August, 25\(^2\), the military crackdown, which took place between April and May, resulted in the death of 91 people, most of them unarmed civilians, and hundreds of people injured.

In next two days the order has been restored in Bangkok and the rest of Thailand, and that was the right time to turn back to the idea of reconciliatio in Thai society. In the address on national television, Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva said Thailand plans to swiftly return to normalcy, but acknowledged that obstacles remain. "We recognize that, as we move ahead, there are huge challenges ahead of us, particularly the challenge of overcoming the divisions that have occurred in this country.\(^3\)" He mentioned also that the officials created two programs aimed at helping residents and businesses return to normal life.

On June, 10 Prime Minister Abhisit presented a “letter to Thai people”, calling for reconciliation in the country in his nationwide speech on television. Earlier the Prime minister turned to an electronic medium that has been used so effectively by his opponents: “I would like to invite the people of all sectors to take part in the reconciliation plan\(^4\),” he wrote in his Twitter feed. The plan was not different form the one announced three weeks before, just some more details were given. One of them was his intention to push for the completion of Thailand reform plan before the end of the year and give it to the Thai people as a New Year’s Gift. However, the dates of the present parliament resolution and of new election were left undefined. The process began the same day with a religious ceremony involving five faiths, followed by a meeting of representatives of several groups of people, invited to give their opinion.

\(^1\) CNN World, ‘Death toll climbs in Bangkok as Thai PM warns of civil war’, 15.05.2010, assessed on January 5, 2011
\(^2\) The Irrawaddy, ‘Thailand’s Reconciliation is Likely to Fail’, 25.08.2010, assessed on January 27, 2011
\(^3\) CNN World, ‘Thai premier unveils reconciliation plan after chaos’, 21.05.2010, assessed on January 6, 2011
\(^4\) Ibidem
Almost eight months passed since the government’s reconciliation plan has been in process. In this particular circumstances, when everyday counts, even if it is still early to talk about the final results, this is might be a prudent time to check if the plan is really working for the good of Thai citizens or it is just used by the government as a tool to get more time and earn the votes before new elections. In order to find the answer for that question, in this chapter I would like to look at the reconciliation initiatives of the government in detail and applying the reconciliation theory to understand what is actually the government reconciliation plan is about.

**Together We Can Campaign**

Even before the official start of the governmental reconciliation plan program, and in some sense as a preparation to it, the government, together with the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) launched the ongoing project called “Together We Can” aiming to help those, mostly Bangkok citizens, suffered personal and property damage during the time of anti-government protest. Every sector was invited to come together and to revive Bangkok so that it is as good, or even better, than it was before the crisis. Everyone has a stake in Bangkok and can take part in rebuilding, restoring and rehabilitating the capital. The campaign slogan is the 4 "P"s for Bangkok - public, private, people and partnership. Under this campaign so far there has been the Big Cleaning Day, Big Planting Day, Religious Ceremony, Walking Street, charity concerts. I would like to look at some, that I believe, playing an important role in deeper understanding of the Campaign and the reaction of the people on it, more in detail.

*Big Cleaning Day.* The after effects of the conflict left the streets of Bangkok covered in ash, tires, and debris of all sorts. After a thorough safety check by the Center for the Resolution of Emergency Situation (CRES), several areas in central Bangkok were returned to the BMA for rehabilitation, and Sunday, May 23 was announced as a Big Cleaning Day to clean the roads and move out debris from the areas affected by the Red Shirt protest, aiming to open to traffic, business offices and schools in the area of former camps on Monday. “This is the start of the rehabilitation. The cleaning is aimed to heal the public mental wounds
and also restore normalcy for the tourism sector,” Bangkok governor Sukhumbhand Paribatra said¹. Everyone was invited to take part.
The event started at 9 a.m. at the King Rama VI Monument at the main gate of Lumpini Park. Bangkok Governor led workers from the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) and volunteers to tidy up the Ratchaprasong area and nearby zones. According to different sources 4,500 to 6000 persons including city officials and civil service employees as well as volunteers joined the event.
The cleaning zones included the Ratchadamri Road-Ratchaprasong intersection, Silom Road-Narathiwat Ratchanakharin-Sathon roads, Rama IV Road-Sam Yan and Saphan Lueang intersections, Siam Square and Henri Dunant Road. The other areas are Witthayu (Wireless), Sarasin, Lang Suan roads and the Chidlom area, Rama IV Road and areas in Bon Kai, Klong Toey and TVChannel3, as well as Ratchaprarop-Si Ayutthaya intersections and the Din Daeng area. Independent groups disbursed free water, food, and energy drinks to support the volunteers throughout the day.
According to the words of observers and participants the mood was very joyful. Everyone from employers and their worker to school children in matching outfits and with their own cleaning tools came together in an effort to do something positive. Many of them were wearing T-Shirts with the inscription Together we can. Almost everybody had friends taking photos of them working. A lot of foreigners who were also helping Bangkokians to clean their city were very excited and impressed by the enthusiasm and energy of the people around them.
The massive campaign was widely observed by media. Next day national television and Internet were inundated by hundreds of videos showing people cleaning the streets of Bangkok, interviews with participants. A number of interesting videos and pictures were spread on You Tube. Most of them are having encouraging patriotic context. There was the one impressed me the most: pictures from the event were put on music and accompanied with the text². The first phrase one can see is “they burned our beloved Bangkok,” starts sorrowful song and the photos of destroyed building appear. Than it changes for positive one and the text that shows up is the following: “they ruined -

¹ Xinhua News English, ‘Capital Bangkok organizes Big Cleaning Day after violent rally ends’, 23.05.2010, assessed on January 3, 2011
² YouTube, 'Together We Can: Bangkok Cleaning day’, 23.05.2010, assessed on December 26, 2010
we wash, they trashed – we sweep…” I believe the message that those kinds of videos were sending can be seen from different perspectives, but division between ‘them’ and ‘us’ seemed to be very clear. This actually corresponded to the political line of the government that put blame for the long and bloody protest on the group of terrorist that were trying to stir up the national hatred.

Religious ceremony. After cleaning the streets of Bangkok, on May, 26 BMA and the Ratchaprasong Square Trade Association (RSTA) organized combined religious ceremony of five faith groups - Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Brahmanism and Hinduism - as part of the city's rehabilitation measures to bring healing to a wounded public spirit and to restore normalcy. The largely religious ceremony included a wide variety of prayers, rituals and motivational speeches whilst the gathered audience also queued to give alms to a contingent of over 1,000 Buddhist monks. The religious ceremonies, prayers and rituals, took place at the Statue of King Rama VI, at the entrance of Lumpini Park, facing Sala Daeng crossroads where much violence took place, at the intersection of Ratchadamri, Rama IV, and Silom roads.

Mr. Sukhumbhand said the ceremony was to mark a ‘new beginning’ for the city of Bangkok, considered a symbolic hub for the economic development of the nation affectionately known as the ‘Angel City.’ The governor urged people of all groups to focus on forgiveness, leave the conflict and violence behind and come to join in united to bring back beautiful Bangkok.

Meanwhile, about 20 people attended the cremation of Italian photographer Fabio Polenghi that was shot during the protests one week before. Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, the Italian embassy and the Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand sent wreaths to the funeral.

Grand Sale, Silom Walking Street. After a big clean-up campaign to give back to the capital a more normal face and spiritual ceremony on the following day, on the weekend of May 28-30 the curfew was finally lifted, public transport back to normal operation hours; and Silom Road went into a festive mood with the street being turned into a pedestrian area filled with small traders, which have been affected by the casualties at Rachaprasong, Silom, and Pratunam and around Victory Monument. The event was organized by BMA and private businesses.
under the Together We Can campaign. About one thousand sellers got the place to sell their wares and continue to make money free of charge. According to different sources the event made a profit of approximately 100 to 150 million baht and was visited by up to three thousand consumers.

Most of the people, who took part in the Grand Sale, both vendors and consumers¹ “There are so many consumer, I would like to thank everybody,” told the reporter one business owner, whose shop was located in the Central One Mall. One girl, who came there for shopping that day explained: “I heard about that through the TV. Hopefully I will help stimulate the economy and help those affected by the protests to make a living during the time of crisis.”² However, there were also some negative views. The author of the article 'Bangkok's benchmark to normalcy is shopping'³ posted on the Global Travel Industry News webpage was arguing the "Reunion" in Thai society was looking like an indecent commercial opportunity as it has been associated to a Sale and “the legitimate sense of happiness starts also to be exploited from a pure commercial point of view as if shopping, shopping, and again shopping were the only way to heal Bangkok woes and uncertainties.” He believes a sale campaign cannot be associated to the tragic events of March-May with its high toll of victims, especially when there is no indication that at least part of the money would go to the victims’ families or help to reconstruct some of the communities, which suffered from destructions. Some other comments I heard and read were pointing out that Thai people need shopping much more than democracy.

The first steps that were taken by the government before launching the reconciliation plan are very important in the way that they clearly show how strong still power of tradition and culture is in Thai society. Every event stresses main values, such as national unity and religion, and aims to get back to ‘normalcy’, thus Thai authorizes advocated for the status quo, preserving bureaucratic political structure, institute of monarchy, boost tourist economy.

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² Bangkok Post, ‘Together We Can’, video, 31.05.2010, assessed on December 28, 2010
³ eTurboNews, ‘Bangkok’s benchmark to normalcy is shopping’, 3.06.2010, assessed on January 4, 2011
Reconciliation Plan in Effect

After the plan was launched, the government established several independent bodies to deal with the objectives of the plan. The Committee on Reform Strategy considers constitutional and other government reforms. The Committee on Reform Assembly canvasses Thai civil society and establishes national assemblies that supposed to function as a channel for public input into the reconciliation and reform process. Over a three years period, together these two commissions should develop a plan to "solve" social inequalities. The Commission for Reconciliation takes two years to investigate the May 2010 violence. Then there’s also a committee for media reform, and one for police reform.

As for today, the results of work of all those bodies seem to be very contradictive. Even when the plan itself can be not bad, its implementation in the given conditions looks either completely different from the expectation of the majority of the population or insignificant.

To begin with the Independent Fact-Finding Commission for Reconciliation, headed by Kanit Na Nakorn, the country's former attorney general, it is charged with probing the underlying circumstances and root causes of the political crisis, but it does not function as a truth commission in its most common sense - a model used in countries with protracted internal conflict to identify human rights abusers and those responsible for the deaths on all sides of the conflict. The approach to the problem does not look systematic as the results are only random not numerous amnesty acts for some red-shirts protesters, arrested during the demonstrations, while, according to the countries National Human Rights Commission, around a hundred red-shirt supporters, including elderly people and people suffering from illness, have been detained since May without the right to a lawyer and the right to bail. There were even reports about those heavily beaten. One of the main complaints of protesters was a lack of justice in

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1 The Irrawaddy, ‘Thailand’s Reconciliation is Likely to Fail’, 25.08.2010, assessed on January 28, 2011.
Thailand. The Department of Special Investigations has vigorously pursued court cases against leaders of the antigovernment demonstrations, who are accused of terrorism, but it says it is still investigating the military’s role in deaths and injuries. In his interview with Bangkok Post\(^1\), Khanit concluded, that the problems that Thailand faces today did not stem for the law, but from its enforcement by the police, prosecutors, the courts and the corrections officers. According to his words, there are over 30,000 cases pending in the Supreme Court now. “The magnitude of the cases is a reflection of the despicable conduct of some law enforcement officials who are lazy, submissive to social and political pressure, and servile to politicians. But, most seriously, we give the police too much investigative power”\(^2\). The delays in the investigations are further hindering efforts to reconcile the polarized electorate, especially among rural northeastern voters who complain of a double standard for the elites and for the rest of the country.

Commission is supposed to report about the results of its work every half a years, however, according to the head of the committee, the government’s forensic department has not responded to requests for autopsies, and private telephone companies are not cooperating because they do not want to be “dragged into the case\(^3\),” military and police also refused to cooperate with the committee. Latest only underlines the ascendance of military power in Thailand, whose budget and overall influence in politics raised sharply since 2006 and whose leadership obviously feared it would face a public outcry if it admitted that soldiers had killed civilians.

Next paragraph of the reconciliation plan that seems to be truly crucial in country’s reunion was to ensure that the media operate freely and constructively. Talking about the media in his roadmap, Prime Minister Abhisit said that in today’s information society, the right to freedom of

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\(^1\) Bangkok Post, ‘TRC wants to find the truth, not pass the blame’ 26.12.2010, assessed on January 29, 2011

\(^2\) Ibidem.

expression and information must be respected\textsuperscript{1}. Yet, with technological advances, the media have at times been used as political tools by exploiting legal loopholes. In this connection he proposed that independent body should be created to control the quality of media, in order to ensure that they are not misused to create conflicts and hatred, thereby leading to violence. The role of this independent mechanism in future should play the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission (NTBC). According to the broadcast frequencies draft bill, the NBTC made up of representatives from media organizations would deal with content that posed a threat to national security or was pornographic. This initiative can really solve the problem of biased media reporting and promote its independence, yet, there are doubts of two kinds. Firstly, it is hard to predict if the mechanisms stated in the draft bill would be adequate to keep pace with the fast and continuous development of mass media technology. Secondly, many self-interest groups would try to push for the nomination of their representatives as candidates for a commissioner post on the NBTC\textsuperscript{2}. If the latter happens, the initial idea of the creation of the committee will be completely disrupted.

Next, extremely important part of the government plan was amendment of the present Thai Constitution with the subsequent resolution of the parliament. It was proposed to change the content of several sections of the ground country’s law. The government sponsored project suggested to amend the charter on Section 190 that talks about international agreements and Section 93 – 98 concerned with the parliament elections. The draft of the bill has already passed two parliament readings that last one supposes to take place on February 11, 2011. If regarding Section 190 there were no huge debate and consensus came fast, the reading on changes in evctional law passed in the very strained atmosphere. The amendments to Sections 93-98 aimed to change the current system, which allows voters to


\textsuperscript{2} Bangkok Post, ‘Media reform bill finalized for the cabinet’, 4.01.2011, assessed on January 31, 2011
choose several candidates in one constituency, the constituencies are to also become smaller. The number of elected and appointed parliament member is also to be changed. Some political observers believe that those amendments give smaller parties in the coalition government a better chance at winning seats in the next election\(^1\); however it also supposes to increase compatibility of Democrat Party against Puea Thai, especially in the north-east and north, where the Democrats are weakest. According to the words of Prime Minister, as soon as the amendments pass the last reading, the parliament will be resolved and new general election will be held. Although the majority of Thais agree with the proposed constitutional amendments, according to the Suan Dusit Poll, 74.27 percent of those surveyed do not believe that those constitutional amendments alone would help solve the chronic problem of vote buying in the country. Moreover some parliament parties, such as PAD, are opposed any of the proposed amendments on the election law and believe that the government pushed forward the changes only to win more time.

The last aim of the five-point reconciliation map that I would like to mention is the project that aims to resolve social injustice and inequalities. Already the way it was presented to the public arouses again the feeling that the government count a lot on traditional perceptions of the authorities by the population. The Prime Minister announced the objectives of the plan at the very end of the year, calling it as a New Year’s Gifts to Thai people. Talking about the content of the project, there are nine points in it; among them better social security for worker in the informal economy, such as taxi drivers or street vendors; the credit access to the underprivileged. Abhisit targets taxi drivers for his Bt1/6 billion lending scheme to enable them to own their vehicles. Subsidies for fuel companies will also be provided to keep the prices for the gas on the same level. This plan is very often being put in comparison to the populist policy of the former Prime Minister, Thaksin. Critics do not believe that this policy can resolve the problem

of social injustice and narrow the gap between rich and poor. The painful lesson of the past shows that the ‘gifts’ made in expense of taxpayers are used only to rise the popularity of the government and to attract votes for next elections. The fact that nothing about corruption or creating new jobs was said underlines the short-term character of the plan without sustainable development strategy.

**Emergency decree**

To make things worse the reconciliation plan was being carried out under the declaration of emergency decree. On April 7, 2010, in response to the escalation of violence, Abhisit’s government declared a state of emergency in Bangkok and some other parts of the country. The Emergency Decree on Public Administration in Emergency Situation\(^1\) allows the Center for the Resolution of Emergency Situations (CRES), an ad hoc civilian-military body, to detain suspects without charge for extended periods; use unofficial detention facilities, where there are inadequate safeguards against possible abuse in custody; and impose widespread censorship. Public gathering of more than five people was prohibited. Officials have effective immunity from prosecution for most acts they commit under the decree. Later already in October, in order ‘to prevent feather violence\(^2\)’ the state of emergency was extended on many other provinces.

The government has used the Emergency Decree to undermine media freedom and violate the right to free expression. Section 9 of the Emergency Decree\(^3\) broadly prohibits “the press release, distribution or dissemination of letters, publications or any means of communication containing texts that may instigate fear among the people or is intended to distort information, which misleads understanding of the emergency situation to the extent of affecting the security of state or public order or good moral of the people both in the area or locality where an

\(^1\) Emergency Decree on Public Administration in Emergency Situation, B.E. 2548 (2005).
Unofficial translation

\(^2\) Human Rights Watch, Thailand: Repeal Emergency Decree, 24.11.2010 URL:
assessed on January 31, 2011.

\(^3\) Emergency Decree on Public Administration in Emergency Situation, B.E. 2548 (2005).
Unofficial translation, Section 9
emergency situation has been declared or the entire Kingdom." Section 11\(^1\) authorizes officials to "cancel or suspend any contact or communication in order to prevent or terminate the serious incident."

According to the Human Rights Watch statement from November 24, 2010, Thai authorities were using emergency powers “to violate fundamental rights and obstruct efforts to bring abusers to justice.”\(^2\) In the end of December 2010 the emergency decree was lifted, however legislation, namely the Internal Security Act (ISA) to deal with any security threats, took power. According to common opinion, this replacement did not change the situation a lot, for example media censorship is still in practice mostly in name of national security, although the prohibition on public gathering was lifted.

**Lese Majeste Law**

According to the Article 8 of the Thai Constitution 2007, “the King shall be enthroned in a position of revered and shall not be violated. No person shall expose to any sort of accusation or action”\(^3\). The constitutional statement was feather developed in the Section 112 of the 1958 Thai Criminal Code, as amended in 1976, which reads “Whoever defames, insults or threatens the King, the Queen, the Heir apparent or the Regent shall be punished with imprisonment of three years to fifteen years.”\(^4\) In the world practice this kind of laws is known as a 'lese majeste', in English "injured majesty," and characterizes the crime of violating majesty, an offense against the dignity of a reigning sovereign or against a state. The securitization of monarchical rule in the country was put as a grounding basis for the reconciliation plan as number one priority.

In direct conflict to these authoritarian provisions are a number of provisions from the Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand of 2007,

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\(^1\) Emergency Decree on Public Administration in Emergency Situation, B.E. 2548 (2005). Unofficial translation, Section 11


\(^3\) Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand 2007 (2550), Section 8.

\(^4\) Criminal Code, 1956 (2499). As amended until the Criminal Code № 176 2003 (2547), Section 112.
Sections 4, 5, and 30 uphold the principle of equality of “all persons” who shall not suffer “unjust discrimination” for “difference in...constitutionally political view.” And is one of the main obstacles to the open political dialog in the Thai society. The discourse over the Thai lèse-majesté law represents the serious conflict between the sacredness and privilege of monarchy, on the one hand, and basic democratic rights and freedoms, on the other. The coincidence of a popular sovereign, who is ruling the country for already more than forty years, and monarchy with tough laws protecting them from criticism has long figured among those Thai anomalies to which scholars and analysts devoted little attention or thought. This discourse has largely gone unexamined by Thai academicians and virtually never directly challenged in court by human rights advocates. Foreign scholars of Thailand, with a few exceptions, have also avoided addressing the subject too critically. However, the prolonged legitimacy crisis and growing frustration of the mass with the political order in the country results in changes in the dynamic of the discourse. In the situation of when the instability threats to the traditional order, Thai authorities have been extremely intolerant of perceived criticism of the monarchy. Thousands of websites have been blocked, and a number of people charged and arrested. Neglect of lèse majesté as one of the crucial factors in Thai politics had become untenable. The frequent use of the severe lese-majeste law has provoked widespread condemnation around the world, and a campaign by academics to have the law changed.

In this Chapter, I will examine the history of the Thai lèse-majesté law and its implication, in the late nineteenth century to the present, with special reference to the most recent and enduring cluster of lèse-majesté cases. Looking at the actions of the government and analyzing some recent lese majeste cases, I will elaborate on how the provision of the law influences democratic rights of the people in the country, in particular the freedom of speech, and determine whether the particular offence should be maintained.

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1 Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand 2007 (2550), Section 4,5,30.
The first “modern” lèse-majesté law in Thailand was issued by the King Chulalongkorn in 1900. In this first version, lèse-majesté was merely a serious kind of defamation, the words that could injure the reputation of the royalty and the king’s officials, and then there was simple defamation to protect the reputation of private citizens. The difference between two was not very strong: three years’ imprisonment for injuring the royalty (several years later the charge was already up to seven years) and two years for defamation of a private individual.

The revolutionary events of 1932 and the end the absolute monarchy in Thailand did not bring to abolishment of the law, but led to some changes in the way the lèse-majesté law may be interpreted. Inspired with the ideas of democracy, the lawmakers allowed citizens to express criticism of the state. The final adjustment to the lèse-majesté law came with the revised criminal code of 1958, in which the word “insult” was added as an aspect of lèse-majesté. This was one of the key features that have made determination of “true” lèse-majesté even more difficult, because if ‘defamation’ means basically the act of damaging another’s reputation, than the notion of ‘insult’ is much broader and in a certain way can be applied to any statement made in the address of the sovereign. “Insult’ lies in the eyes of the beholder, almost any word or action can be construed as insulting. As a result, offhand private comments made in what is perceived as a public place can land a Thai in jail.

The wording of the law has not changed since, but the charge for violation of the law increase from three years in the first version of the law, to a maximum of fifteen according to the current Thai Criminal Code, while the charge for defamation of private individuals remained the same. Moreover, the provision of law can be extended by the relationship of who is covered to the one being impugned, such as lèse-majesté charges being suggested for someone questioning the wisdom of, for example, a daughter of the king, the institution of the monarchy.

1 Criminal Code, 1956 (2499). As amended until the Criminal Code № 176 2003 (2547), Section 112.
2 Streckfuss D., Eawsakul T. Speaking the Unspeakable: Lèse-Majesté and the Monarchy in Thailand, 2010 - p.15
itself, and to symbols or symbolic references that can be equated with
the king. It is clear from the above that the Thai Criminal Code classifies
offences of insult or defamation in accordance with the status of and
relations among persons in line with ethical norms in Thai society, in
particular the almost sacred image of the King. But there is something
that is similar for all the people: anyone in present-day Thailand, from
the lowest in society to the highest government ministers, can be
charged with lèse-majesté.
Since 1960 lèse-majesté cases in Thailand number more than 300. In
the 1950s, there was an average of about one charge per year, and only
half of those actually going to trial. In the 1960s, there were five cases a
year, with three going to trial. In the 1970s, the number of charges
peaked at 11 per year, but the number of those leading to prosecution
dropped to 2.5 per year. The average number of lèse-majesté charges
per year fluctuated since then, going from 2.5 in the 1980s, to 5.2 in the
1990s, and dipping slightly from 2000 to 2005 to 4.8. In that period, as
it can be observed from the data, the number of lèse-majesté cases is
relatively low, that can explain also low level of public concern about
the provision of the law.
The situation changed dramatically in the last five years. At the end of
2005 in his annual nationwide broadcasted birthday speech, the King
cited his own example in calling for tolerance of others’ opinions by
discussing royal power and prerogatives. He said: “If the King can do no
wrong, it is akin to looking down upon him because the King is not
being treated as a human being. But the King can do wrong.” The King
welcomed criticism – if it helps to keep the monarchy informed and
helps to correct any mistakes.
The speech brought inspiration to the public and raised hopes for more
democratic rule. However, political situation in the country was
extremely controversial, and the military coup in September 2006
resulted in Thaksin’s government to leave the office. The number of lese
majeste cases has increased dramatically in recent years. According to

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1 The Nation, ‘Royal birthday address: King can do wrong’, 5.12.2005, assessed on
January 14, 2011
the Annual Statistical Yearbook of the Office of the Judiciary of Thailand, only in the year 2006 the number of petitions with the lese majeste cases reached 30 with 21 of those adjudicated in the Court. The number increased in the next year to 126 and 46 respectfully. In 2008—the last year for which statistics were available—authorities prosecuted 77 cases. Hinke C.J., Freedom Against Censorship Thailand coordinator, gives even bigger numbers, "765 persons were prosecuted for lèse majesté between 2006 and 2009—an average of almost 191 per year."\(^1\)

Bringing the data into correlation with the political events that took place in Thailand during that time, it is not hard to recognize direct dependence between those two. In the times of instability and political turmoil, the authorities are demonstrating the increasing intolerance when it comes to the monarchy. Yet major international human rights NGOs such as Amnesty International have been reluctant to speak out about the issue, but several loud trials made the misuse of the law evident and brought a huge resonance to the public breaking the long silence.

On 28 August 2009, Darunee Charnchoensilpakul, a pro-Thaksin and pro-democracy campaigner, was sentenced to 18 years in jail on lese majeste. She was arrested on 22 July 2008 after taking an exceptionally strong 30-minute speech denouncing the 2006 coup and the monarchy. The court refused to grant her bail at least three times. "The court reasoned that the charges against Daranee carried very heavy penalties, and that her alleged offences could tarnish the monarchy, therefore granting her bail could hurt the feelings of the King’s loyal subjects."\(^2\)

When Darunee’s trial began in June 2009, the judge, citing reasons of national security, closed the trial. This decision caused an emotional response from different sides. The Amnesty International (AI) broke its long silence on lese majeste by criticizing the court for ordering a closed trial of the proceedings and rising concerns about the damage that the law causes to the freedom of expression in Thailand.

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Many people believe that Darunee’s refusal to plead guilty was the reason why she has received such a harsh sentence. This perspective is also expressed in a Financial Times article that states: “Few defendants in lèse majesté cases choose to fight the charges as Daranee did: lawyers say the ill-defined laws are almost impossible to beat even in a case that is open to public scrutiny, and most choose to plead guilty and beg the king for mercy on conviction. Thai law stipulates that defendants who choose to admit the charges against them can receive more lenient sentences”.¹

One example of that can be the case of Harry Nicolaides, an Australian author who was sentenced to three years imprisonment but served a little over a month of his prison term before being granted a royal pardon. Nicolaides said in an interview that: “On the king’s 81st birthday I saw fireworks in the distance. Some prisoners had tears in their eyes, praising a man they regard not just as their king but their father. I may not be Thai, but I am a son, and I know what it means to love a father. I am applying for a royal pardon. I pray the king learns of my plight so I might enjoy his grace.”² Very often in those cases petition to the King for forgiveness is the only way to escape the charge. The law itself and its provision clearly reflect the traditional Thai client-patron order.

This demonstrates that in Thai society, the lèse-majesté offence has its basis not only in the principles of international law or constitutional law but also in Thai ethics, culture and Buddhist principles which are unique to Thai society. This tradition of paternalistic governance also explains a phenomenon. Many Thais accept the King as a sacred symbol of Thai nation and religion. This makes a discussion of the issue extremely problematic.

Another obstacle on the way to resolve the problematic issues is that not only ruling political coalition uses the law to get rid of its opponents. There are also Red-shirts considered to be democratic

movement who speaks in support of justice and more freedom in the society, in their struggle for political power do not keep aloof from it. It was happening during the time when Thaksin was in the office of Prime Minister. Thaksin had sued Sondhi, owner of the Manager Newspaper and founder of the defunct Asia Times twice, in 2005, for carrying in his newspapers the fiercely anti-Thaksin commentaries. Thaksin withdrew his suits after the revered King Bhumibol Adulyadej criticized the number of such legal actions. However, two years later, in 2007, Sonhi was sentenced again to three years in prison for libeling exiled prime minister; it is important to note, that two days after a pro-Thaksin party won the most seats in a parliamentary election. Thaksin himself was charged for lese majeste by his enemies several times. Every time, however, he was claiming that he was misquoted and that he remained loyal to the royal family, but “he was critical of the Thai elites who form what he calls a “royal circle” of influence and are opposed to his populist style of government”\(^1\).

One of the most recent cases took place in the very beginning of 2011, when Gen Prem, the chief privy council, Anand, a former prime minister, and Siddhi, a former foreign minister, were altogether charged by Red Shirt movement for alleged lese majeste acts which might have possibly offended the Royal Household. Red Shirt spokesman Worawut Wichaidit, who brought up the charges to Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva at Government House, quoted cable messages circulated by WikiLeaks as saying the above mentioned trio “had discussed varied topics with former United States ambassador to Thailand Eric John a few years earlier”\(^2\). The Nation’s senior journalist Pravit Rojanaphruk wrote an open letter voicing his displeasure on this matter: “You must all be well aware that the lese majeste law is draconian and undemocratic. I know Prem is one of your arch-enemies, but first ask yourselves how crushing your enemies by using an undemocratic law would bring about a more democratic society? How then will you differ

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from the yellow-shirts who prefer a “good coup d’etat” as a panacea for all perceived political ills? ...Your decision to use the lese majeste law to crush your enemies only makes Thailand more undemocratic”¹

Thailand is not unique in having lèse majesté law. Of the 44 countries ruled by monarchy, many still have lèse majesté laws which are applied seldom and judiciously to the most outrageous and intentional cases of insult to heads of state. What makes the Thai situation unique is that the government chooses to enforce these laws in a ‘capricious and Draconian’² fashion even when criticism or commentary is sensible and respectful.

Summarizing what was already said before, it is necessary to admit, that while Thais believe that the lèse-majesté law remains important given Thai ethics and culture, there is also an increasing criticism on the provision of the law. First of all, it represents a serious threat to the freedom of expression as guaranteed in Section 43 of the 2007 constitution. It inevitably becomes a political tool aimed at suppression of criticism. Moreover, petitioners insist the law has been abused, asserting that lèse majesté complaints more often involved the settling of political scores than actual insults to the king, his consort or the heir to the throne. There have been regular reports of protagonists of political conflicts accusing one another of lèse-majesté. A more in-depth analysis shows that there are two aspects of such accusations. One is that the accuser wants society to condemn or apply social sanctions – given the people’s respect for the King – against the accused, which could result in a decline in popularity if the accused is a politician. The other is the legal aspect which could subject the accused to criminal punishment and thus remove or at least temporally suspend from the political arena.

The experts of the International Crisis Group in its Report on Thailand from July 2010 insist that the lèse majesté law should be amended with “the severe penalties reduced and authority to accuse an individual of

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violating the law should be limited to prosecutors”¹. According to them, the amendment of this law would create a more conducive atmosphere for open discussion of the monarchy’s role. More radical position took the daily newspaper The Nation saying that “there is no place for lese majeste law in a truly democratic society because citizens in a democracy should be able to express their “critical” views without fear of persecution”². David Streckfuss, although agreeing with that statement but being more skeptic about the possibility of abolishment of the law in the near future, still insist on the necessity change the law and proposes that ‘the addition of this single clause may set things right: Amend Section 112 of the Thai penal code by adding the clause that makes the use of the lèse majesté possible ‘only by order of the King or with his consent’.”³

2007 Computer Crime Act
As a continuation of the lese majeste and freedom of speech discussion, I would like to look at one more legislative act that serves to ensure the provision of the former. The Computer Crime Act came into force on 18 July 2007. On the same day the article with the title “Black Wednesday: Cyber Crime Act becomes effective”⁴ appeared in the web, and was only one of many concerned with the new legislation. For understanding the reason of those concerns and how it is correlated with the discussion on lese majeste, it is important to look at the content of the Act. The law came into force at a time when the Internet had already established itself as a popular means of communication, especially for urban Thai population. Internet allows for a freer flow of information due to the fact that it is more difficult for the government to control. It also offers alternative sources of news. Internet publication also travels immediately to an unlimited number of readers. Users can also remain

anonymous. Many people use web blogs to express and share their views on a broad range of issues.

The constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand 2007 inscribed in Part 7 Liberties in Expression of Persons and Mass Media, Section 45 guaranteeing the right and freedom of expressions that “A person shall enjoy the liberty to express his or her opinion, make speeches, write, print, publicize, and make expression by other means.” Yet, as it was already mentioned before, there are some sections in the main countries law that put restrictions on this article; also censorship is permitted during the time of war or under the emergency decree.

Before the enactment of the Act, Thai authorities did not have any specific legal tool to address number of Internet related offences, although some of them could be prosecuted under Thailand’s Penal Code. The Computer Crime Act establishes more specific charges and, in some cases, heavier penalties. And the most important distinction is that new law gave the authorities power to block or shut down websites they deem unlawful.

The Offences in the Act can be put in two groups: offences committed against computer systems or computer data and content offences committed via a computer, which are already crimes in the Penal Code, but where they are committed by using a computer in the sections 5-13 and Sections 14-18 correspondently. It is the second category that has created most of the controversy, and in particular Section 14 which includes offences against national security, and hence covers lèse majesté since it is classified under the heading of Offences Relating to the Security of the Kingdom in the Penal Code. It provides for ‘imprisonment for up to five years and/or a fine of up to 100,000 baht’.

According to the data available on the May 2010, since the Act first came into force, the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology has applied Section 20 to shut down or block thousands of

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1 Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand 2007 (2550), Section 45.
2 Act on Computer Crime 2007 (2550), section 20
3 Ibidem, section 14
websites or web pages alleged to contain lèse majesté\(^1\). In January 2009 the Senate set up a committee to address the issue, and indicated that over 10,000 websites could be targeted by the campaign. Global Voices Advocacy (GVA), an international media freedom group, documents a far higher figure. GVA reports that at least 113,000 websites have been blocked by the government\(^2\). In March 2009, police officers from the Crime Suppression Division in Bangkok arrested director of the online newspaper Prachathai, Chiranuch Premchaiporn, charging her under Sections 14 and 15 of the Computer Crime Act. The police claimed lèse majesté statements were posted for 20 days on prachatai.com from in October 2008. Many people believes that the prosecutors’ decision to file a lawsuit against Chiranuch Premchaiporn under the Computer Crimes Act will serve as a new paradigm shift in Thailand’s long-standing tolerance of free expression\(^3\).

In July 2010 in a seminar organized by Thai Netizens Network representatives from both mainstream and online media, along with media activists, aired their criticisms of the law and called for the government to amend the Section 15 of the Act\(^4\), arguing that it will prevent the law from being abused to threaten political dissidents and restrict the public’s right to freedom of expression.

Back in July 2010, just after PM Abhisit declared his much vaunted “reconciliation process,” the International Crisis Group reported the following: “Abhisit Vejjajiva’s unilateral offer of a “road map” to national reconciliation will lead nowhere without the participation of its opposition, including his deposed predecessor. A credible investigation of the violence, enduring legal reforms, and properly addressing societal inequities cannot succeed without the Thaksin-aligned Red

\(^3\) The Nation, ‘A Dark day for Thai freedom of expression’, 5.04.2010, assessed on January 10, 2011
\(^4\) Section 15. Any service provider intentionally supports or consents to commit the offence under section 14 in the computer system under his control, shall receive the same punishment as prescribed in Section 14 (shall receive the same punishment as prescribed for the offender in Section 14)
Shirt movement. This cannot happen if its leaders are detained, marginalized, or on the run. Asked for his view of the national reconciliation effort, Thonchai Winichakul, a professor of History at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, told the writer that “the current campaign of reconciliation is a combination of political whitewashing and genuine but careless and thoughtless efforts.” Its shortfall, he said, it is “pushed and run by people who are responsible for the crackdown and their supporters with no signs that it will include the process of justice without the involvement of the victims.”

2 The Irrawaddy, ‘Thailand’s Reconciliation is Likely to Fail’, 25.08.2010, assessed on January 28, 2011
IV. Research Findings and Results

The government sponsored “reconciliation plan” should definitely not be taken at face value. It can be compared to a continuation of the "nation, religion, king" ethos which began during Vajiravudh and compare that with the contemporary example. The three pillars define the national interest. The move of "reconciliation" is not about "healing wounds." The idea seems to further promote the belief in a "united Thailand," which is less about nationalism than it is providing a secured platform to consolidate support for the status quo: robust tourist economy, social conformity, lack of political dissent. There is a major social rift that is consciously being divided into "united" Thais who promote social conformity and "enemy" Thais who are anti-government. The events organized by the government right after the demonstration under the slogan ‘Together we can’ show the implication of these ideas. Turning back to normalcy, respect to religion and monarchy were the main values promoted during this campaign. In its reconciliation road map the Abhisit-fronted government focused on “defending” the Thai monarchy and even made that defense a matter of “national security,” which has been seen in the frequent use of ‘lese majeste’ legislation and long lasting emergency decree.

Most of the concepts of political reconciliation are closely related to the democracy promotion, finding the truth and restoration of justice, it is about accepting the alternative views, and it is almost the opposite to what one can observe in Thailand. Yet, the simplest definition of term ‘reconciliation’ that the dictionary provides connotes the coming together of things that once were united but have been torn asunder. In this interpretation the term can be applied to the processes in Thailand and one can talk about the progress if the government achieves its objective in eliminating its political opponents.

Failed Reconciliation

With the help of the Positive and Negative Impact Analysis which was developed by Responding to Conflict (RTC)¹ and has been adapted for these guidelines, it is possible to either analyze activities within a

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specific conflict context with regard to their anticipated impact, or to use this tool for risk assessment and thus drawing the arrows from the factors towards the activity in order to visualize possible risks the activity is undergoing. It helps, in particular, to raise awareness of the indirect and possibly unintended impacts of the activity. In my case, this method will use the first option and look at the activities of different actors in order to define how their attitudes changed since the reconciliation plan has been launched, if it represents new risks or opportunities for the government of the Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva.

Since the Emergency Decree has been lifted there are regular demonstrations organized by leaders of the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship. They announced protests on the 10th and the 19th days of each month. The monthly rallies are to commemorate the end of the anti-government demonstration on May 19 and against “the government accused by the red shirts of coming to power with no legitimacy”¹. The NSC report says that key red shirt figures will relaunch community radios closed down by the Centre for the Resolution of the Emergency Situation and will use anti-government television channels to attack the government. They will move their protest to another level². It is believed that Abhisit needs to start worrying again about the Red Shirts. Although, today Puea Thai, most popular red-short party represented in the parliament, has no leader qualified to compete with Abhisit as a prime ministerial choice, it has Thaksin, who enjoys high level of popularity among Thai population, as a close adviser to fight the Democrat Party. On January 9th, there were 30,000 red shirts gathered at a rally in Bangkok, about 5-6 times the number that the government predicted. The red shirts are once again growing in number and future rallies can eventually lead to violence like we saw in April and May 2010. What makes the positions of the government even worse is that if only several months before red shirts seemed to be the only real threat, the situation has changed in December 2010.

Incident that took place at the Thai-Cambodian border when several Thai nationals were arrested for crossing into Cambodia illegally plays an important role in development of the conflict and is being used to create bad image for the present government. The group that has been

² Ibidem.
detained by military was led by Panich Vikitsreth, a parliament member who sits on a government committee that handles border issues with Cambodia; among the other there were Veera Somkwamkid, coordinator of the Thai Patriots Network, and Ratree Pipattanapaiboon, Veera’s secretary. The latter were recently charged for illegal trespassing and espionage for eight and six years of imprisonment correspondently. The situation stirred up the resentment by the Abhisit’s government that is claimed to be not able to help Thai citizens. Demonstrations were held several times during the last months (January) by Thai Patriots network, which represents the yellow short movement, and if in the begging they called for the government to take drastic measures to bail out those detained, today, after the Cambodian court pronounced the verdict the protesters claimed the Prime Minister to resign. Taking into consideration that those detained were high officials and political group leaders, it is hardly possible that they were not aware of what they are doing and what kind of after-effects could follow. Moreover Panich is known for his speeches against Cambodia. The provocative character is obvious. The situation is being used to feather deepen political conflict in Thailand and weaken the positions of the present Prime Minister before the elections. Some competent individuals that I talked with about the issue believe that this everything is done also to internationalize the so far internal conflict. Hence, despite the government’s efforts to raise its popularity using co-optation of opposing groups, the emergency decree, restraints on freedom of expression and other undemocratic tools, it not only failed to reach any kind of consensus with the main political opponents, red shorts, but also gained new enemy and the political crisis tends to deepen. Traditional approach to reconciliation shows its inconsistency to resolve the conflict.

The dynamic quality of the present reign and rapidly changing political situation had one clear implication. As a result of economic development extra-bureaucratic forces have emerged in Thai society. Consequently new actors laid a claim to influence the national policy. This tendency has become stronger after the short period of democratic reforms resulted in the rise of wealthy and powerful Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra. The time when he was in the office can be characterized by the increase of corruption, populist policy, discrimination to minority groups, but what made him so special is his vision of the policy in Thailand. Thaksin set about systematically to
dismantle the political networks that were created and functioned for decades. Even if his vision of the policy was just new corrupted economic network, he challenged the legitimacy of bureaucratic rule and showed that it can be a subject for changes. The problems in the society that were hidden for long time behind traditional values have become visible. This shift in understanding of the political order made it impossible to come back to traditional ideas of ‘good order.’ Thai society today is in the period of political transition. The distribution of wealth, social hierarchies and roles are being transformed. The government and other factions within and outside of the government are looking to consolidate power prior to general election to the parliament that are to be held this year, and in more log-term prospective, prior to the impending royal transition. Underneath this political competition, ever more pluralist interests, as well as shifting conceptual paradigms weaken the traditional framework of ideas and narratives that define a nation. The role of monarchy and notion of legitimacy in application to traditional hierarchical political structure need to be rethought, the sustainable peace in the society can be reached only by negotiating a new social contract.

First of all, the new social contract if intend to achieve long standing reconciliation has to include all interested stakeholders. What is needed is action to facilitate interaction and create spaces that allow dialogue among different parts of society. In order to address the notion of legitimacy it is necessary to put an end to the old political tradition of coup d’état and of military interference in almost every internal political conflict. The state authorities should obtain the legitimate right to exercise political power only through general and fair elections with fair competition and the results accepted by all parties. It can only be realized when every player sticks to the constitutional rule and the judiciary maintains its non-discriminatory standard. The third most important problem in Thai society to be address is the notion of justice. The April-May 2010 events took life of about 90 people, more than thousand were injured, the violence has to be investigated and the justice has to be restored. The three components: open and pluralist political debate, legitimacy and justice - can make up a conceptual framework that will help to develop the policy to achieve a sustainable reconciliation in Thai society.
**Reconciliation Postponed**

Reconciliation that based on principles mentioned above shows that in general the conflict in Thai society can be resolved by moving country along the way of democratic development. Yet, the events of the last year do not show any progress in this direction. Hesitant efforts from the government and other parties to put forward the dialogue are undermined by the existence of ‘taboo’ topics in the Thai society and other restraints on freedom of expression. The Emergency Decree that gives extra power to the police and military, allowed media censorship and puts restriction on political gatherings was in effect more than seven months after the demonstrations ended in May. Just two days ago, on January 9, 2011 state authorities, being afraid of losing control over the situation because of the anti-government demonstrations organized by yellow movement, has launched the Internal Security Act which provision create similar conditions as under the state of emergency. The lese majeste legislation and its implementation through the provisions of the Section 112 of the Criminal Code and Computer Crime Related Act represent another challenge to the freedom of expression in Thailand. In the name of national security, government censors printed media and Internet resources, also journalists being afraid to be punished practice self-censorship and keep silence on sensitive issues. In this context it is important to mention that in theory every definition should include clear objectives and targets. The citizens should have the same basic understanding of what the boundaries are and what compromise breaches of national security. In reality however, national security is often vaguely defined and thus becomes a loophole for abuse by the government in advancing their own political agendas; and it is not clear whether all this is being done to protect the public, or is the public interests being exploited to justify the elimination of the political enemies. And the law becomes a tool for seizing, destroying or justifying the power. In this situation the open and pluralist dialogue between all interested parties that was defined as one of the most important pillars of the reconciliation process in Thailand is impossible. Justice. If we look at the reconciliation map launched by the government, only its socio-economic dimension is reflected there. Although the fact-finding commission to investigate the violence during the demonstrations in early 2010 was established, it does not have authority to suit perpetrators. It is questionable whether truth without justice can be sufficient for reconciliation. Moreover, while red-shirt
protesters put the blame for deaths on the military, and number of photos and videos showing armed soldiers shooting in the protesters prove this, the Prime Minster seems to be not only reluctant to apologize for not being able to prevent the violence and solve the conflict peacefully, but promoted the idea that ‘terrorists in black’ that were among the protesters stayed behind the deaths. Many observers even regard the appointment of committee as an attempt to gather evidence to support this idea.¹

Another condition that I believe has to be met in order to push forward the process of reconciliation in Thailand is legitimization of the political power. The current Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva is the leader of Democrat Party and the youngest in last 60 years Prime Minister in Thailand. He was born and educated in England and already at the age of 27 was elected as a member of Parliament of Thailand. It seems that he could be the one to develop still weak and young democratic tradition in Thailand. However, the way he came in to power, namely as a result of military coup supported by the palace, hardly can be called democratic. For this reason, in the eyes of population and opposing parties he lacks legitimacy and the experience of last two years showed it can only be achieved through new fair elections.

After long parliamentary discussions about constitutional amendment to the current election legislation, in the very beginning of this year the Prime Minister finally declared that elections will take plays in April. Yet the conflict on Cambodian border followed by anti-government demonstrations of yellow shirts resulted in new changes of political agenda of the ruling coalition. The Internal Security Act took effect in several Thai provinces and the elections seems to be postponed, although the Prime Minister keeps promising that they will take place at least in the first part on the year. Many scholars and politicians are skeptical about those plans arguing that if the Prime Minister, considered responsible for almost a hundred deaths, was able to stay in power in the course of the last two revolutionary years, he would not have any reasons for early dissolution of the parliament, especially in view of the fact that his term runs out at the end of 2011. Furthermore, the Prime Minister has support from some influential international organizations (ASEAN, UN) who offers him help and expertise to resolve the conflict in the country and what is even more important he

¹ Bangkok Post, ‘Army’s power at peak since crackdown’, June 18, 2010.
has strong backing from the two most influential institutions in the Thai policy, the King and military.

I suggest that in this particular analysis it will be appropriate to address the monarch and military as a single political power as over the time the dividing line between them is getting more blurred. Once strong and influential King Bhumibol is now 83 years old and is physically weak. Since 2006 he has been spending a lot of time in the hospital and in September 2009 he was admitted to the hospital with the flu and pneumonia and remained there more than one and a half year. Those factors play important role in today’s political crisis while the longest reign in the Thai history is close to the end and the heir of the King does not have so much power and popularity in Thai society, all the political forces are mobilizing to be prepared to the royal transition. Yet, for the majorities of the population, especially in the rural areas, the King is still of the major significance. He represents religion and is seen as the father of the nation, whose words perceived very often as of the higher instance. Looking at the situation from this angle, one can say that King could be that motive power that can bring the country to reconciliation. However since the abolishment of the absolute form of monarchy in Thailand in 1932, one of the main objectives of the reign was the struggle for influence and popularity. And that was achieved through creation of close connections with influential country’s officials and military officers. The system that was later call by McCargo network monarchy subsequently made the King totally depended on those people, whose power was growing directly proportional to the age of the current reign.

Indeed, Thai military rarely has been under civilian control. Even worse, the generals have more power today than they have had in decades. Having staged more coups than any modern army, the Thai military's views still figure into every political calculus. It owns about half of Thai radio stations. It is closely connected to the monarchy though the members of Privy Council, especially its president Prem Tinsulanonda, military general and former prime minister, who sometimes represented himself as being the voice of the king. And while its budget has more than doubled since the 2006 coup, the events of April and May have shown that its competence and commitment to democratic values are beyond the pale of analysis.

Let me go back to the idea of parliamentary elections and suggest that in the first half of this year or in in the beginning of 2012 they will take
place. Even in this case it is unlikely that the results of elections would be accepted by all stakeholders and it would bring political stability to the country. Political competition that one can observe in Thailand at the moment hardly can be described as fair or pluralist; every party regardless of its political principles uses all the available means to gain popularity or to discredit its opponents.

Everything mentioned above is far from being called democratic political development and definitely does not speak in favor of conflict resolution and successful reconciliation process. Does this mean that it is still too early to talk about democratic reforms and reconciliation in Thailand? Are there any counterforces in the society that can change the situation? In order to answer those questions I would like to refer to more theoretical ideas of social democracy and look at the actors who are supposed to have a function of monitoring the state authorities and military: media, political parties in opposition, NGOs and civil society; the international organizations that promote human rights and democracy can be also taken into consideration as very often they have strong influence on the actions of political leaders in the member countries.

Due to unfair political competition and restrictions on freedom of expression the first two actors partially failed to fulfill this function. Concerning non-governmental organizations that operate in Thailand today, they are very limited in tools to provide any significant changes, the situation has been even worse since the April-May protests. They need to act carefully in order not to become victims of authoritarian laws. Doing my internship in Friedrich Ebert Stiftung in Bangkok I could clearly see that the situation in the country is so unpredictable at the moment, that any organization that takes side of one or another party expose itself to danger.

During the demonstration in the beginning of the last year, the slogans on many posters were written in English. Assuming that great bulk of protesters were representing the rural north and hardly could read that, it can be seen as the massage to international community with the call for attention. Moreover, the recent UN General Secretary Ban Ki-moon’s visit to Bangkok attracted several political activist groups under the red shirt movement. The 24th June Democracy, Red Chiangmai, Red Ayutthaya and Nonthaburi Democracy groups, plus the Thailand Mirror Foundation and Red Power magazine led by Somyot Prueksakasemsuk, criticized Ban’s meeting with Abhisit during a brief rally by about 300
of their members. The group described the Democrat-led coalition as the "government of the April-May atrocities"¹ and called on the UN to oversee investigations into the 91 deaths arising from the incidents as there was no adequate independent and transparent scrutiny within the country. Yet, the International Organizations although being critical on the situation in Thailand, in particular on such a long kept emergency decree, double standards, and restrictions on freedom of expressions and provision of laws, are not very active. I believe the main line that most of them follow can be summarized in the statement that Ban Ki-moon made during the mentioned above meeting with the Prime Minister Abhisit. He said he hoped “the dialogue on national reconciliation would be conducted in good faith and be an inclusive and broad-based process” and the most important: "This is a Thai issue and the issue will be resolved by Thais."²

The most important and interesting category of actors is its population. In the country ruled by democratic law, it not only monitor the results of work of political institutions, it the only group of actors who actually gives the power to state authorities through the general elections. From the democratic point of view, civil society in Thailand is still weak and often has strong believe in traditional values and sees the paternalist hierarchical order as the ‘good’ one. According to the words of Suchart Bamrungskul, a political scientist of Chulalongkorn University, far from viewing coups as damaging the country, very often Thais called for military to break political deadlocks³. The population seems to be vulnerable to the fast changing situation. During my first visit to Thailand at the time of March-May demonstrations, I talked to people that occupied the city center and found out that many of them know exactly who and what they struggling against, but they had no clear notion about was the final goal. Many taxi drivers during that time were mostly supporters of red movements and followed the event lines with a great interest. That has changed; today many ordinary people are tired of the political instability and just want to have all this behind. In the beginning of this year I talk to some more people and they actually believe that Abhisit is dissent, yet he is depended on those who brought him to power. People do not believe that any constitutional amendments can resolve the problem of vote buying and unfair

² Ibidem.
³ Bangkok Post, ‘Coup’s legacy ‘near anarchy’, September 20, 2010
competition. For those reasons, and also because of lack of sufficient civic education in Thailand, the majority of population is politically reluctant and cannot be seen at the moment as the power that would move as a collective force to help ‘de-politicize’ the military role and take control over the actions of the government. Unfortunately it seems that the conflict in the country is still far from being over, it is rooted in long lasting hierarchical tradition, where one’s chances to get higher position depend not on his professional performance, but on his connections with ‘right’ people. The bureaucratic forces and military are ever strong and influential. The forces that could create counter-power and bring changes in the political order are still highly heterogenic and their political agenda is often inconsistent. There is also an objective reason for the crisis: Thailand today is in its transitional period. The King, once powerful and influential has bad health and is probably going to die soon and the heir does not have popularity and energy of his father. The Great bulk of today’s Thailand policy-makers are also in their 70 and 80. The most skeptical observers believe that only generation shift will make significant changes in the country possible and reconciliation is unlikely to be achieved. Forthcoming elections make the situation even worse as the government and other parties are so much concerned about how to increase their chances in the struggle for people’s votes that all it was doing so far was oppressing political opponents and distributing goods in the absolutely unsustainable manner in order to get popularity among ordinary citizens. Although being agreed that only royal transition and overall generation shift will put the end to the conflict, I believe that first steps on the way to reconciliation can and should already be done by future government, in particular by giving more freedom to the media and by facilitating pluralist political dialogue as reluctance in addressing the question of reconciliation can lead to unpredictable consequences. Only one months ago, on January 15, 2011, the anti-government protest in Tunisia, that started in December, resulted in the official reassignment of the President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali after fleeing to Saudi Arabia, ending 23 years in power. Just ten days later anti-government demonstrations started in Egypt and Yemen. Although there mostly talks about a ‘domino effect’ and the threat to other authoritarian governments in the Middle East and its influence on the rest of the world is still to be seen, Thai government should learn the lesson from
these events. This is a turning point in the history of the county and it is important not to oversee the moment.
Conclusion

It would be simplification to refer Thai political culture to either authoritarian or democratic tradition. My first visit to Thailand coincided with the red-shirts demonstrations last year. The first anti-government rally I observed staggered me. That day I woke up very early because of the loud sounds of music and voices that were heard from the outside. I went to the street and saw thousands of people moving by cars, motorbikes or just by foot along Sukhumvit Road. The spectacle was impressive; it did not look like a political demonstration, rather like a victory parade or a festival. The atmosphere of happiness was everywhere; many people were dancing on the roofs of their cars and street vendors, as well as sellers in small shops left their working place and went closer to the road and applauded. No fear or anger, only inspiration and the confidence of success. Later the demonstrators had occupied several important intersections in the city center and that followed by two months of political bargaining and negotiations, while national media was full of the critic on the government policy. At the same time the rest of the population could continue leaving their normal life without feeling insecure. Could I ever imaging something like this going on in my country? I think no. I felt that democratic values have significant weight in Thailand and freedom of expression and freedom of media are respected. But that all was before I realized that the situation is much more complex.

Since the abolishment of absolute monarchy in 1932 every Thai government claims that democratic development and promotion of human rights are of the first priority for them. Due to Western political and economic influence contemporary Thailand has constitution and all democratic institutions. Yet, long history of patriarchal rule and strong influence of the religion resulted in development of rather different political system that can be characterized by hierarchical bureaucratic structure with the King, or if being more accurate, ‘palace’ on top and strong role of military in policy-making process. The reason why I use the term ‘palace’ instead of the King is in hidden behind the changes that were happening inside the system during the last several decades, in particular so called ‘network monarchy.’ The king’s ability to take an active role in Thailand’s politics long depended on his contact with a circle of talented, able and devoted people. The three pillars “Nation,
religion, King” define the national interest and security. Wide-ranging laws, rules, regulations, practices and bureaucratic structures have been developed over the years to uphold and protect these institutions. At the same time, the very success of that form of ruling the country has also exposed a great flaw. It has institutionalized a belief in management of Thailand’s problems through discrete phone calls and conversations among a small number of people. However, Thailand has changed, past the point at which such an approach to governance remains useful. It is too complex, too big, too tightly connected to the rest of the world; its people, at all levels of income, education, and status, are simply better informed.

Transformational period coincided with the forthcoming end of the current reign polarized the Thai society and resulted in demonstrations and internal violent clashes between the government and opposing parties. In order to bring the conflict to the end government came with the reconciliation initiative. The ‘reconciliation road map’ was mostly focused on socio-economic and not cultural/value division; it represented a willful public denial that the political crisis that had engulfed Thailand since late 2005 and early 2006 continued. And it can be seen as an attempt by the state to achieve a return to consensus political reality, a manipulated erasure of the past for the purposes of eliminating opposition to the government. Yet, the recent political events and increasing instability indicates that traditional approach to conflict resolution has only deepened the crisis and had pushed Thailand into “revolutionary” times.

This paper does not seek to make any forecasts about the future political development in Thailand since it is almost impossible to predict what will happen after royal transition - even for those who devote their careers to analyzing Thai politics. The process of "reconciliation" as a finalized state of social reality should be subject to critique though. Two main questions that this research aimed to answer were: How the reconciliation in Thailand should look like? And would it be achieved in the near future? Learning more about the country through literature, observations and talks with qualified individuals, I realized that the sufficient answers cannot be found only in the framework of reconciliation theory and through analysis of current political events. For this reason, Thai history and political culture also became the objects of the study.
Based on the results of the analysis and my observations, I came to the conclusion that the process of reconciliation which aims to bring long peace and stability to Thailand should start with respect of such democratic values as freedom of expression and rule of law. It should be about accepting the right of others in the state to have differing views. And those views should be recognized and welcomed as a part of national debate. What is also important is that the current Prime Minister came to power as a result of military coup. This circumstance created the problem of legitimacy of power in the country which can be addressed only through democratic elections, while armed forces should support any and every legitimate government. Finally, after the clashes between demonstrators and police in April and May 2010 that took lives of more than 90 people, no reconciliation is possible without restoration of justice: the investigation of the violence has to be conducted and the perpetrators punished.

However, there is nothing simple about the reconciliation process. Especially in the immediate aftermath of a violent conflict, it can appear to be an impediment to more important priorities. With the urgent political pressures to prepare to inevitably coming general elections and in a longer prospective to royal transition, it is in fact very tempting, especially to politicians, to concentrate on the political process and misuse the idea of reconciliation. And this is what has been seen during the last year. The government is putting more restrains on freedom of expression and freedom of media in the country in a name of national security. The military is gaining more and more power and it is out of civilian control.

In the very end of the previous chapter I briefly mentioned the events that are taking place in the Middle East today and said that there might be something in common between the situation in Thailand and what was happening there. There is less than one week passed since I finished that chapter but Internet is already full of articles, interviews and blogs talking over the issue. In the interview with CNN Thai Prime Minister Abhisit has called on Egypt leaders troubled by civil unrest to exercise restraint. ‘When the protesters were peaceful [when they] were exercising their constitutional rights, there was absolutely no need for any kind of force to be used’. Yet what can be seen on the streets of Bangkok today contradict his words: the emergency decree

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1CNN, Thai PM: Leaders must exercise restraint against protesters’, 28.01.2011, assessed on February 13, 2011
that was in effect more than 8 months finally was lifted in the end of December but as soon as the new wave of demonstrations increased the Internal Security Act took effect and police got an extra power. Looking for more information I stumbled upon the blog discussing why the street protests in Egypt could overthrow the government and the red-shirts - although we can talk already about red and yellow shirt as they both in the opposition to the government today – have not succeeded acting the same way. Among different opinions there was one that unfortunately, according to what I have seen and learned, reflects the nature of Thai policy-making process: ‘In Thailand you must have backing of the military and the blessing of the royal family’. The Democrat Party’s led government is still in power only because it has support from the palace and the armed forces.

The political opposition exists, yet, it is pretty much heterogeneous and very often the interests of different factions are so incompatible that at least for today there is no possibility for them to act as a single force against the government. What makes things worse is that although all the parties claim that democracy and human rights are their first priorities, in the political struggle for people votes they use all means, not taking care about democratic principles or political ethic. Everyone has plenty of accusations they can level at each other. Mutual recriminations bolster the sharp divides and give support to hardliners and extremist ideas. The other actors, such as media, NGOs or political organizations, either not able to influence the situation because of number of restrictions in the legislation or do not want to interfere into internal events in the country. Finally, the majority of the population, partially because of the lack of civic education, partially because of general distrust to the politicians and skepticism about the positive effect of reforms, is politically not active and just wants to go about their lives.

Unfortunately, the conflict in Thailand is far from being over and it is likely that political instability will remain even if early elections take place as there is no clear commitment on honoring the result in advance. There are many ‘pathologies’ in the counties development that can be seen as the obstacles to reconciliation. However the extreme polarization in the society is the result of the very new process. Thailand today is the period of royal transition which could mean a new

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1 Yahoo Answers BlogSpot, ‘Why Egypt can overthrow the government by street protest but Red Shirt can’t overthrow the government this way?’ 13.02.2011, assessed on February 13, 2011
beginning for different political forces and what inevitably resulted in struggle for redistribution of wealth, social hierarchies and roles. As long as the objective reason for the conflict exists, it is very hard to achieve the sustainable reconciliation. Yet, reconciliation is a long-term process and the right direction could be taken already today by giving people more freedom to talk about their real needs. Thailand must shudder at the comparison to its own demonstrations. It is always better to solve the problems of the people and seek to address the problems of people their concerns and not wait for more violence and deaths.
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