From guardians to democrats? Attempts to explain change and continuity in the civil–military relations of post-authoritarian Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines

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Abstract  This article explores the role the military has played in the democratization processes of three ‘young democracies’ (Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines) in Southeast Asia. The issue of democratization vis-à-vis the armed forces is even more relevant for Southeast Asia as a region with historically powerful militaries and long traditions of political interventions and rampant human rights abuses. While Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines have historically struggled with deep entrenchments of the military – not only in the political arena, but also within the bureaucracy and the economy – their respective militaries played very different roles within democratization processes. The Indonesian military remained politically neutral after the fall of Suharto, the Philippines witnessed various failed coup attempts by mid-ranking officers, while the Thai military played a key role in the termination of democracy through a coup in 2006. The dominant literature on democratization tries to explain the different outcomes of democratization processes to democracy mainly by focusing on elite choices, new norms and values, shifts in conjunctural situations, the unraveling of the institutional structures of authoritarian regimes and the formation of new, democratic institutional structures. Likewise research on civil–military relations in new democracies has pointed to behavioral change, successful structural reforms (downsizing of the military, capacity-building, withdrawing the military from politics) and civilian leadership in defense and security matters as decisive factors for establishing civilian supremacy. Yet none of these factors fully explains why Indonesia’s armed forces remained politically neutral after the fall of Suharto, while Thailand’s generals launched a coup in 2006. To
answer this question more general political dynamics of democratization processes need to be examined, especially with regard to the formation of new alliances of differing social forces and their impact on traditional power structures, in order to understand continuity and/or change in the military’s attitudes towards democracy.

**Keywords** civil-military relations; transitions to democracy; military professionalism; coup d’etat; praetorianism.

**Introduction**

The literature on transitions from authoritarian regimes to democratic rule has pointed to the decisive roles of the military in the breakdown of authoritarian regimes as well as in sustaining young democracies. At the heart of this lies what Peter Feaver (1999) termed the ‘civil–military problematic’, that is that the military possesses the coercive power that is able to suppress opposition to authoritarian rule as well as it can terminate democratization processes through a coup. Theoretically this paper draws in a critical manner on Huntington’s seminal work *The Soldier and the State* (1957) and his concept of the ‘professional soldier’, as well as on scholarship dealing with the application of the concept to non-Western militaries, namely Stepan’s ‘new professionalism’. Stepan (1973) argues that Huntington’s concept of ‘military professionalism’, which confines the military to an on-political role, has only become reality when the focus of the military is on external warfare. With the main ‘security predicament’ of Third World states stemming from internal security threats (Ayoob 1995), different military doctrines and attitudes have emerged. The result of what Stepan termed ‘new professionalism’ was the entrenchment of the military in politics and consequently the politicization of its doctrines.

This assessment is supported by respective empirical findings concerning the continued military’s involvement in counter-insurgency, intelligence functions, and a continued influence on policy-making. The continuities in operational terms furthermore seem to explain the perpetuation of authoritarian prerogatives in the hands of the military. Yet these theoretical approaches lack explanatory power with regard to the different attitude and behavior of the military vis-à-vis the civilian-led, post-authoritarian governments in Southeast Asia. Why did Indonesia’s TNI (Tentara Nasional Indonesia – Armed Forces of Indonesia) remain politically neutral in post-Suharto Indonesia despite fears over a looming break-up of the country, while the Thai military after more than a decade of relative political neutrality removed the democratically elected government of Thaksin Shinawatra from power in 2006? I argue that this is not to be explained solely by looking at missing prerequisites of nation state building (i.e. the internal legitimacy of the state) or institutional failures, but that we must take into consideration more general dynamics between the defective/illiberal nature of young democracies in Southeast Asia, and the attitudes/roles of the military in Southeast Asia. It is my intention to show that the military does
not ‘float freely’ above some kind of ‘social vacuum’ (Robison 1986: ix) but is situated in a larger set of power structures and their corresponding institutions.

1. Huntington’s ‘professional soldier’: theorizing the ‘military mind’ in Western democracies

The mainstream of the literature on democratization processes considers democracies as consolidated when the authority of a publicly elected government presides over all policy arenas and actors – including security policies and the armed forces. Juan Linz (1990: 158) has described a consolidated democracy as ‘one in which none of the major political actors, parties, or organized interests, forces, or institutions consider that there is any alternative to democratic processes to gain power, and that no political institution or group has a claim to veto the action of democratically elected decision-makers’. He further added that democracy can be seen as consolidated, when it is the ‘only game in town’.

The question of civilian authority over the forces of coercion goes back to antiquity (McNeill 1982). The subordination of the military to civilian control has remained an existential question for any form of polity because of what Feaver (1999: 214) has termed the civil–military problematique: ‘The very institution created to protect the polity is given sufficient power to become a threat to the polity’. With regard to democratically organized polities, these remarks resemble another problematique: within democratic systems the military must at all times accept de jure authority of democratically elected governments, that are legitimized by the will of the people and determined by free and fair elections. Hence, the civil–military problematique is not only about the issue of the military destroying the polity that created it, but it is also determined by issues of military subordination and accountability to the democratically elected civilian authorities. This brings us to a fundamental theoretical question: how can civilian control of the military be established and maintained?

In civil–military relations theory, most of the literature corresponds directly or indirectly with the approach put forward by Huntington. The first main thread of this approach is Huntington’s concept of ‘objective civilian control’, according to which civilian control is actually not enhanced by maximizing the control of the civilian groups in relation to the military, but by maximizing military professionalism. By respecting an independent, autonomous military sphere within government, the professionalism of the military increases. This in turn makes the military highly divergent from society and requires a clear distribution of powers and responsibilities between the military and the civilians. The specific expertise that makes out the military profession is the management of violence and the defense of the state, ‘politics is beyond the scope of military competence, and the
participation of military officers in politics undermines their professionalism’ (Huntington 1957: 64). At the same time, any meddling in military affairs by politicians equally hinders civilian control, because it is most likely to introduce the often petty power struggles of realpolitik into the military world, which in turn can lead to a politicization of the military and thus encourage political interference.

However, Huntington’s views, especially his emphasis on the concept of military ‘professionalism’, have also provoked criticism. While Huntington advocated the maintenance of two very distinctive spheres – the military and the civilian – in order to ensure civilian control, Morris Janowitz held that such a separation would in fact put civilian control in danger. A military unhinged from its societal base would lead to the development of vast attitudinal differences between military and society and therefore make soldiers less prone to accept the principle of civilian control. The answer to this problem was the ‘citizen-soldier’, representing the values and norms of society inside the officer corps: The greater the connection between society and the military, the less significant the attitudinal differences, which in turn increases possibilities of civilian control of the armed forces. Hence professional soldiers are by necessity political as they are part of a wider politico-military environment (Janowitz 1960).

2. Southeast Asian militaries: a ‘military mind’ of a different kind

Whilst especially Huntington’s concept of the ‘professional soldier’ has been highly influential on a normative level, many scholars dealing with Third World militaries have criticized its limited explanatory power. Against the various direct and indirect political interventions of militaries in many Third World countries, the ‘professional soldiers’ described by Huntington seem to be the exception rather than the rule. Even though the military apparatus (like all other administrative structures) in most non-Western states resembled, due to the introduction of statehood through colonialism, those of the West in many aspects (rank, uniforms etc.), they certainly functioned and behaved very differently (Tilly 1992: 206). Against the background of empirical studies on the military in South America it was Alfred Stepan (1971) who pointed out that different forms of military ‘professionalism’ exist. Stepan holds that the concept of ‘military professionalism’, which confines the military to a non-political role, only works when the focus of the army is on external warfare.

On the contrary, if the main function of the military is internal, because the legitimacy of the government is challenged by parts of the population, different military doctrines and attitudes emerge. Additionally, the primacy of force in the anti-colonial struggles itself shaped a self-perception of the military as the guardian of the sovereignty of the state. From the threat of separatism and communal violence to Communist uprisings: the main security predicament of Third World states has been domestic instability, caused by low levels of state and regime legitimacy (Ayoob 1998: 198). While what
Stepan (1971) described as ‘new professionalism’ emerged as a doctrinal response to the specific circumstances that postcolonial armies were confronted with (i.e. the states monopoly of coercion being challenged by various armed groups), its main impact was the entrenchment of the military in politics and henceforth a lack of civilian supremacy and control. Similarly, Alagappa (2001: 58) refers to the early stage of state formation in Southeast Asia, with the legitimacy of governments of states like Thailand, Indonesia or the Philippines being challenged by various insurgent groups, and the crucial role coercive forces have therefore played in state and nation building and regime security.

In Southeast Asia as in many other regions this came at a price: risking over-generalization, various studies have pointed out that the patterns of civil–military relations of Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand and all other Southeast Asian countries have never matched the model of civil–military relations laid out by Western scholars. Due to the most pressing security threats having internal origins and the fact that civilian institutions were relatively weak and at the same time simultaneously confronted with the tasks of establishing functioning governance, achieving political legitimacy amidst large ideological, religious or ethnic divides and also fostering nation building, the military took up a wider role in the political, economic and social sectors. Militaries in the region have led ministries and sometimes even governments, served as parliamentarians, bureaucrats and in the diplomatic service, built roads and schools, policed villages, run hotels, and owned TV-stations, rice mills or airlines (Alagappa 2001; Mani 2007; May and Selochan 2004).

Thus, the strict separation of civil and military spheres was never reproduced in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, its large capabilities in politics, the economy and society guaranteed the military a far-reaching institutional autonomy and made it a dominant political force under authoritarian rule. Linked with the vast array of socio-political and economic functions came corresponding doctrines which legitimized military involvement in politics – sometimes even against constitutional processes. But what is more, the doctrinal inclinations have been reflected in the constitutions and in the organizational structures of the military. In turn these have facilitated, and sometimes even engrained, participation in government and business (Crouch 1997; Sundhaussen 1985). Accordingly, politicization and institutional autonomy have aggravated democratic control of the security forces. Bellamy and Hughes (2007: 42) note that, ‘rather than protecting their citizens, in practice the region’s militaries have expended more effort controlling, killing, torturing and arbitrarily imprisoning them in order to maintain a particular order or regime. The primary purpose of armed forces in the region has been to protect states and regimes from internal opponents rather than external aggressors’.

These historical trajectories of civil–military relations have by and large hampered post-authoritarian reforms of the military in all three countries. Reforms have rarely managed to change its pro-interventionist, political
self-perception, nor have they altered the structural and operational dispositions that have nurtured many of its corporate interests. Interlinked with such failures are problems such as the continuing military influence on intelligence and security policy-making, its unrelenting involvement in national development as part of its counter-insurgency missions, and the limitations of civilian control mechanisms. This is catalyzed through the inability of civilian governments to sufficiently finance the military through the state budget even after the end of authoritarianism. This in turn has led to a continued dependency on ‘off-budget’ sources of revenue, such as military businesses and/or external aid, which has exacerbated the limits of civilian oversight mechanisms.

These findings are in line with research generally highlighting the ‘defective’, ‘illiberal’ or ‘dysfunctional’ character of post-authoritarian regimes in Southeast Asia. The incomplete transition to democracy of former authoritarian regimes has been broached by political transition theorists, leading to the adoption of the concept of ‘hybrid regimes’ (Bünte and Ufen 2009). ‘Hybrid regimes’ are formally electoral democracies that at the same time still comprise authoritarian elements and thus ‘fail to meet the substantive test, or do so ambiguously’ (Diamond 2002: 22). By and large the ‘defective’ character of young democracies is determined by analyzing the ‘functionality’, or more so ‘disfunctionality’, of their political institutions. The current institution-centered approach of transition theory has found repercussions in scholarship on civil–military relations in post-authoritarian regimes, according to which the ‘weakness’ of civilian institutions and the police to deal with domestic security issues explain the often dire status quo of security sector reform, and the pervasiveness of authoritarian prerogatives in the hands of the military. Against this background comes as no surprise that the ‘military mind’ in Southeast Asia has by and large remained one far distant from Huntington’s concept of the ‘professional soldier’.

3. Beyond the military mind

The theoretical approaches outlined in this paper at first glance suggest, again risking over-generalization, that failures to change the military doctrines, and hence to depoliticize it, strongly correlates with shortcomings to transform its role from internal security to external defense. Interlinked with such failures are problems such as the continuing military influence on intelligence and security policy-making, its unrelenting involvement in national development as part of its counter-insurgency missions, and the limitations of civilian control mechanisms.

While I do think that a lack of ‘professionalism’, the poor quality of ‘civilian’ institutions as well as their ineffectiveness to deal with apparent domestic security threats helps to explain the little changes in military doctrine, as well as the continued political influence of the military (especially in the field of security policies), they do not explain the different behavior of the
military vis-à-vis the seemingly ‘illiberal’, ‘defective’ civilian-led democracies. With many observers claiming that civilian control over the military in Southeast Asia had been firmly established – despite the fact that various authoritarian prerogatives remained in the hands of the military in Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand – the swift military coup in Thailand has highlighted the differences between the three countries. Whereas the Indonesian military have remained politically neutral since the fall of Suharto, middle ranking officers of the AFP have launched various ill-executed coup attempts, and Thai officers successfully removed the democratically elected government of Thaksin Shinawatra from power.

However, if politicized military doctrines combined with high levels of security threats and domestic instability would explain why militaries launch a coup, it is not Thailand but Indonesia that should have witnessed one or more military coups after its transition to democracy. The fall of Suharto, triggered by the Asian crisis of 1997/98, led not only to sweeping political reforms, but was paralleled by the outbreak and/or escalation of a variety of separatist and communal conflicts in Aceh, Papua, Sulawesi, the Moluccas. Moreover, East Timor (an Indonesian province since its occupation in 1976) managed to secede from Indonesia after an UN-backed referendum in 1999. East Timor’s secession and the looming internal stability of Indonesia sparked fears amongst the military, conservative elites and the international community about a balkanization (disintegration) of the country. Yet at the same time, especially under the tenure of President Abdurrahman Wahid, policies to reform the military even curbed its political influence to a certain extent – with little direct political interference of the military.

Thus I argue that ‘high levels of domestic threats’, the lack of ‘professionalism’, and ‘disfunctionality of civilian institutions’ do not help explain why the Thai military actually removed Thaksin from power. That is not to say that analysis of changes and continuities, along with analysis of the perpetuation of various military prerogatives in post-authoritarian contexts, is unhelpful. It certainly helps to determine the scope of the military’s institutional autonomy in post-authoritarian Southeast Asian countries and provides relevant empirical findings. Thus separating ‘military’ and ‘civilian’ spheres and institutions clearly makes sense for analytical reasons, but is at the expense of studying the underlying power structures that shape not only patterns of civil–military relations, but also the general trajectories of transitions to democracy. Policy outcomes, such as the Thai coup (Case 2007), are only seen as a reflection of the (‘defective’) design or the ‘dysfunction’ of these institutions/institutional arrangements (Aviles 2006: 7). In addition, it blinds us to the fact, that the ‘dysfunction’ of political institutions might be functional to preserve or enhance certain socio-economic or political interests (Rodan and Jayasuriya 2009: 36).

In order to gain a better understanding of the factors that brought about a military coup in Thailand, I suggest it is necessary to dissolve the dichotomy of ‘military’ vs. ‘civilian’ institutions and take a deeper look at the
underlying power structures of the transition processes in Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand. Democratization is not only a process crafted by enlightened elites, nor is it the result of institutional predispositions or historical path-dependencies. Its trajectory, scope and sustainability are just as much the product of struggle between contesting social forces (Bellin 2000: 175). This does not necessarily mean endorsing theoretical propositions that believe in one class being the historical protagonist of democratization, nor does it involve a mechanistic determination of the outcome of changes in state–society relations driven by democratization processes in the economic foundations of society. But as Hamza Alavi (1972: 71) has put it, ‘the latter, although mediated in a complex way, is the ultimate determinant of the superstructure’. Hence, although it possesses some institutional autonomy vis-à-vis ‘civilian’ institutions, the military in Southeast Asia is only relatively autonomous (Alavi 1972), because it is determined by the socio-economic foundations of society and their corresponding political institutions. Similarly, Samuel Huntington (1957) has argued in one of his later works, thereby as a matter of fact reversing much of his pertinent theoretical argument found in The Soldier and the State (1957), that the causes of military interventions can not be found inside the military itself, but in the socio-economic configuration of society vis-à-vis the political institutions.

4. Challenging the ‘military mind’? Post-authoritarian reforms of the armed forces in Southeast Asia

In light of the specifics of civil–military relations in Southeast Asia it comes as no surprise that central demands of the democratic reform movements in Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines have included the depoliticization of the military, the supremacy of democratically elected civilian authority vis-à-vis the security forces, and the prevention of military involvement in domestic (political and business) affairs. Demands to professionalize the military have resulted in a variety of reform strategies and policies in the three countries, challenging the ‘military mind’ and respective military doctrines, as well as the military’s corporate interests, to a certain extent. The case studies will show that despite the fact that several single reform measures have been successfully undertaken after the unraveling of the authoritarian regimes in Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines, the general aims of depoliticizing the armed forces and establishing democratic civilian control have not been reached. What is more, in some areas reforms have been forestalled or even cancelled due to a growing political influence of the armed forces. Again, these shortcomings are only to be understood against the background of an increasing appropriation of democratization processes by old, predatory interests in increasingly ‘illiberal democracies’. And while the establishment of ‘illiberal democracies’ has certainly not gone unchallenged by democratic reform movements in all three countries, the Thai coup clearly illustrates the readiness of the old
elites to resort to extra-parliamentary means if their interests are seriously challenged.

**Indonesia**

Out of the three Southeast Asian countries, the transformations that led to the fall of the Suharto regime in 1998 seems to have been the deepest. After 1998 Indonesia quickly transformed itself from a highly centralized authoritarian regime into a seemingly liberal political and economic system. Under the new order no independent power centers existed outside the state apparatus, which is why Benedict Anderson described the *ordre baru* as the victory of the state vis-à-vis society. The unconstrained exercise of political power in economic and social life that characterized Suharto’s new order was based on a complex amalgam of a capitalist oligarchy centered on Suharto, the state’s bureaucracy and the military, with the military being entrenched in nearly all state institutions. Secured by his victory over the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI), and in a country without large landowning elites or a powerful urban bourgeoisie, Suharto established a highly state-centered economic and political system. The economic liberalization that took place in the context of Indonesia’s deeper integration within the global financial markets during the 1980s did not shatter these power structures. Quite the contrary, according to Robison (2001: 106) ‘they precipitated, instead, a shift from public to private monopoly and the harnessing of state power to the interest of powerful coalitions of private and public oligarchies’ still safeguarded by the powers of an authoritarian state.

Once more, the fall of Suharto and the institutional reforms that followed are not to be equated with the establishment of a democracy and a ‘free’ market economy. What it did was to unravel Suharto’s amalgam of power: the formerly dominant politico-business oligarchs and bureaucrats lost the powerful centralized state apparatus that had guaranteed their privileged positions and had secured their interests. A new and more open political system came into place, one in which politics was no longer exclusively rendered vertically through the state apparatus and Suharto’s cronies, but increasingly through parties and the parliament in a decentralized political system (Robison 2001: 120). The ‘diffusion of politics’ after the fall of Suharto made it necessary for the old power-holders to adapt to the politics of reform and consequently to engage in wider and more horizontal alliances in order to be able to protect their own resources of political and economic power (Slater 2006: 208).

Within the political arena, a coalition of moderate reformers and old elites under the leadership of Suharto’s deputy Habibie took over power and initiated moderate democratic political reforms. However the ‘old’ system of collusion, corruption, and nepotism amongst government officials, the military and politico-business oligarchs did not cease to exist. Due to
The de facto elimination of any mass-based opposition during the ‘new order’ there simply were no social forces strong enough to break up the old power structures (Hadiz 2007). While especially Indonesia’s decentralization process changed the institutional structures of governance, the fact that the heads of local governments were now directly elected by their local constituents provided new avenues for predatory elites to keep hold of executive and legislative positions. The main effect of the changes was a dramatic increase in the costs of running for office as, according to Hadiz (2007: 880), ‘money politics was diverted from a concentration on local parliamentary bodies to the public at large’. In a country in which, according to the common poverty definition of the World Bank, more than 50 per cent of the population continues to live below the poverty line, the practice of money politics, combined with the high costs of running for office, make it very hard for reformist forces to step into the political arena and win elections. Hence the workers and farmers who make up the majority of Indonesia’s population have no de facto political representation (Hillman 2006: 27).

However the democratic reforms launched by Suharto’s successor Habibie and the domestic unpopularity of the armed forces because of their close affiliation with the Suharto regime put the military under pressure to reform itself and pull itself out of politics. Consequently, the generals that had withdrawn their support for Suharto during reformasi initiated a new, reformist paradigm (paradigma baru) for civil–military relations in Indonesia. In Indonesia attempts to professionalize the TNI (Tentara Nasional Indonesia – Armed forces of Indonesia) have first and foremost led to the abolishment of Indonesia’s dwifungsi doctrine. Through dwifungsi (double function) the army had previously been able to legally expand its role into political, economic and administrative areas. This included a military-only fraction in the parliament and military officers in top positions in Indonesia’s public administration. Dwifungsi’s abolishment in turn fostered the disbandment of the military-only fraction in parliament, the disentanglement of the military from its former political base, Suharto’s Golkar party, the separation of the police from the armed forces, and the dissolution of all military bureaus for political and social affairs (Sukma and Prasetyono 2003). With the main success of the aforementioned reforms being the political neutrality of the military during the 1999, 2004 and 2009 elections and the lack of attempts to directly influence politics, it must be noted that the changes in doctrinal and institutional terms have not been paralleled by changes in structural or operational terms. While the reforms that aimed at a depolitization and professionalization removed active military personnel from government and parliament, many of the old authoritarian prerogatives were left untouched (Honna 2003).

First and foremost, the military’s territorial command structure, which had guaranteed the military’s continuing involvement in political affairs from the village level to the provincial level, was left untouched. Second, the
TNI continues to raise large parts of their funds through formal (military-owned cooperatives and foundations) and informal sources. The off-budget funds which according to conservative estimates contribute to at least one-third of the military budget (Mietzner 2008: 236) compromised the professionalism and democratic accountability of the armed forces. By having an independent source of income, the TNI can ensure that it is only ever, at best, partially accountable to the elected government to which it is nominally loyal (McCullough 2003). In a recent article Mark Beeson has even suggested that the TNI’s continued involvement in economic activities has made it more or less content with the status quo and prevented military coups in Indonesia (Beeson 2008). While the ‘corporate interests’ perspective seems somewhat oversimplified in analytical terms (Lee 2008), it nonetheless points to the fact that post-Suharto governments have done little to reform the key authoritarian prerogatives that have guaranteed wide-ranging institutional autonomies to the armed forces.

The reluctance of post-Suharto governments to engage in a coherent reform of the security sector corresponds with more general shortcomings of Indonesia’s democratization processes. While the political institutions were widely reformed, the socio-economic power structures of the new order (i.e., the vast, informal patronage networks of the elites) remained largely unaffected through this quasi-‘evolutionary,’ elite-driven transition process (Webber 2006: 410). The result was what Slater (2006) called the construction of a ‘political cartel’. Although elections are formally competitive, the cartel of political elites protected those in power from outside competition. Slater (2006: 208) has even made the point that the political cartel has made Indonesia’s oligarchy ‘practically irremovable through the electoral process, even though elections themselves have been commendably free and fair’.

Again the military has taken part and at the same time benefited from what Robison and Hadiz (2004) called the ‘oligarchization’ of post-Suharto new Indonesia. While the public image of the armed forces was at an all-time low shortly after the fall of Suharto, the armed forces managed to stage a political comeback from 2001 onwards. Boosted by their dominance in fighting the resurgent separatist movements in Aceh and Papua, their new role in the ‘war on terror’, and their non-interference in politics despite civilian attempts to instrumentalize for political gains,1 the military managed to transfer its renewed public image into various forms of ‘political capital’ (Mietzner 2006: 41): First of all, it allowed the TNI to circumvent greater structural reforms, such as an overhaul of the territorial command structure, as well as bestow further pressures to reform itself. Second, the increased popularity of the military provided better chances for active and ex-military personnel in the struggle for executive positions on the regional and national level. Analysis of elections on the provincial levels from 2002 onwards shows that the armed forces managed to keep hold of many governor and district head positions throughout the country through the
endorsement of retired military officers by various political parties (Hadiz 2007: 887). Third, the success in regional elections paved the way for an increased participation of former generals during the national elections of 2004 and 2009. Not only did former general Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono managed to win the presidential elections in 2004 and 2009, but in 2009 all of his civilian rivals chose senior retired officers as running-mates. While retired senior officers’ aspiration to political office was first and foremost motivated by individual ambitions and was therefore not directly linked to the institutional interests of the military, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono’s unwillingness to implement further military reforms shows that retired senior officers are unlikely to hurt the very institution whose reputation had boosted their public standing. Furthermore the courting of the military by the opposition parties in the 2009 elections implies that future elected officials, military or not, will seek the good-will and support of the armed forces.

The Philippines

In the Philippines the military apparatus as well as the existing political institutions were introduced by the US colonial administration at the end of the nineteenth century while leaving unreformed the underlying social and economic structures established under Spanish rule. Thus politics in the Philippines has long been dominated by the large landowners, who used their economic power to exert political influence. After independence, processes of industrialization led to the rise of the domestic industrial class, whose power depended not so much on landownership as on access to state subsidies and foreign exchange. Industrialization also led to an expansion of the urban-based middle and working classes (Hutchinson 2001: 54). Yet despite social change in the context of industrialization the country continued to be governed almost exclusively by traditional landowners (caciques). Elections mainly served as a process ‘by which elites rotate amongst themselves’, as Kerkvliet (1996: 163) described it, while the electoral processes at the same time helped to grant legitimacy to those in public offices as well as the political system as a whole.

A partial disempowerment of the dominant social forces came about only when Marcos took power. Ruling through martial law, Marcos dismantled the institutions and processes of democratic rule, which in turn partly pushed the traditional elites out of the state apparatus. Nonetheless the social and economic base of what Anderson termed ‘cacique democracy’ were again by and large left untouched (Anderson 1988). And with Marcos taking a firm stance against organized labor and the Philippine left, his politics more often than not continued to serve the interests of the dominant social forces. What changed was that political power became increasingly concentrated in the hands of the president and the military, and power was more and more centralized in Manila. Marco further underpinned his hold
over political institutions by giving his cronies control over key institutions, which further narrowed access to political power in the Philippines.

The military gained unprecedented power through martial law: not only did the AFP triple its size under Marcos but it also acquired political, judicial, administrative, and management roles usually carried out by civilian elites (Hedmann and Sidel 2000: 26). Previously the military had been more or less a ‘professional’ institution with no political or socio-economic functions (Anderson 1988: 23). The transformation of the AFP under Marcos moved it from a professional outlook to a national security role with a focus on defending the president and his regime. In order to fill the ranks of the AFP with officers loyal to him, Marcos increased the number of active officers more than threefold. He also more than tripled the size of the armed forces, which led to an influx of poorly trained recruits. Yet salaries and the standard of the equipment remained very low due to a failure to adequately increase the military’s budget and rampant corruption. This led to deep divisions inside the armed forces over whether or not the politicization of the armed forces under Marcos was harming the institution’s own interests and the country as a whole. Many professionally trained officers disliked the politicization of the AFP under Marcos as it undermined the military’s ability to fulfill its primary role: the defense of the country (Casper 1995).

An economic crisis and the narrow power base of the Marcos regime, which had curbed the powers of the traditional elites at the expense of personal forms of rule, led to the formation of a broad, cross-class coalition of forces opposing the Marcos regime. While the emergence of cross-class coalition politics was clearly a new development and ultimately led to the ousting of Marcos through large street protests carried out by a coalition of Communists, clerics, members of the bourgeoisie, parts of the armed forces, labor and students, it was short-lived. Following the opening of the political sphere through the expulsion of Marcos there was a restoration of electoral politics, democratic political institutions and a general freeing of the democratic space. However, similar to the Marcos era, people power never really shattered the old ‘cacique’ order. With the traditional elites surviving the Marcos years, the old forces made use of their wealth and power to instrumentalize the electoral processes and revive their positions inside the state apparatus on the provincial and regional level (Abinales 2005: 135). In the 1987 congressional elections, the majority of seats went to candidates from families with a prior record of political mandates (Hutchinson 2001: 59). However the restoration of democracy also unleashed a variety of civil society organizations, some of which, such as labor and peasant movements, demanded drastic socio-economic reforms thereby threatening the interests of the traditional elites. While the state certainly has been to a much lesser extent captured by elite interests in the post-Marcos era, the input of civil society on national policy remains small (Hedmann 2006).

Furthermore the military’s ubiquitous presence in politics did not end with the ousting of Marcos. The absence of military intervention in politics
as a stark characteristic of post-Suharto Indonesia is not to be found in the Philippines. The tenure of Marcos’ successor Aquino was then disrupted by seven attempted military coups. The tenure of Joseph Estrada ended in 1991 after accusations of corruption led to a popular revolution termed ‘People Power II’, which again saw the armed forces publicly withdraw support from the president and join the reform movement. In 2003 and 2005 the country witnessed two more coup attempts by mainly mid-ranking officers, motivated by the alleged corruption of President Arroyo, but both failed. Yet the large number of coup attempts and military involvement in other methods of regime change should not lead us to the conclusion that institutional and structural reforms of the armed forces have not been implemented. On the contrary, the 1986 constitution of the Philippines leaves the armed forces with no legal options for political intervention. Active military officers are banned from entering government or administrative positions, and control mechanisms of the Congress, previously paralyzed through Marcos’ declaration of martial law, were reinstated (Cruz de Castro 2005). In addition, the police force was institutionally separated from the military and placed under the ministry of the interior. Accordingly, the provision of internal security was to become the exclusive domain of the police, with the military’s main task being reduced to external defense (Hernandez 2007). Against the background of a resurgence of internal conflict, namely the Maoist New People’s Army (NPA) and the separatist Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), and with police capacities in dealing with the insurgents being extremely low, the military was back to its internal role by the 1990s (Hall 2006; Karniol 2002). Plans to turn the AFP into a force dealing solely with external defense matters were fully abandoned through 2003’s ‘Philippine Defense Reform Program’ (PDRP), which, in the context of renewed military ties with the US, shifted the strategic objectives of the AFP back to ‘Internal Security Operations’ (Docena 2007).

Through its key role in the fight against internal insurgents the military as an institution regained popular credibility and maintained its influence on national security policies. With peace talks with the NPA as well as the MILF failing under the Aquino administration, it was the AFP that took the lead in fighting the two insurgencies and therefore continued to carry out a variety of socio-economic functions (Hall 2006). The addition of the officers of the Reform of the Armed Forces of the Philippines movement (RAM), which had been a part of the People Power I, to the coalition that brokered Aquino’s presidency made ‘military men’ a somewhat new political force. Politicized during the Marcos years, many former military officers were channeled into high political or bureaucratic offices under the succeeding administrations (Gloria 2003; Hernandez 2007). Against various ill-fated coup attempts carried out by mid- and low-ranking military officers, the loyalty of the military top echelon has been crucial for the survival of post-Marcos governments (Hutchcroft 2008: 147). Even members of post-Marcos coup plots eventually landed themselves seats in the
Philippine senate and were incorporated into the post-Marcos regime (Pinches 1997: 114).

**Thailand**

While Thailand’s contemporary history was tainted by as many as 18 military coups, the military’s political influence has been declining since the 1970s. The military coup in 1976 and most notably the one in 1991 tarnished the public image of the military. Increasing industrialization, high economic growth rates coupled with democratic reforms since the 1970s had brought about a transformation of Thailand’s political system from a semi-democracy dominated by the military and senior bureaucracy to a more open system dominated by elected politicians. The increasing importance of electoral politics enabled businessmen to dominate electoral politics through the use of local networks, money politics and sometimes even intimidation (Callahan 2005; Ungpakorn 2001), challenging the political hegemony of the old, unelected elites (military, monarchy, bureaucracy) (Pongpaichit 2005). The dominance of businessmen in politics was further aided by the suppression of organized labor and the peasantry through the military as part of its unofficial war against communism since the 1970s (Baker and Phongpaichit 2009: 241). With the democratization of Thailand came a transfer of power from the bureaucracy and military to private, non-state forces, whose power lay in the electorate and whose vehicles were political parties (Bunbongkarn 1996).

The perceived dominance of politics by corrupt businessmen provoked another coup by the military in 1991 (Hewison 1993: 170). The military’s attempts to handpick political leaders in the aftermath of the coup and its drafting of a new constitution that would allow the armed forces to appoint members of the senate and the prime minister led to popular discontent. There was resistance to a return to the old, paternalistic politics, resulting in mass demonstrations against the military takeover. The refusal of the coup leaders to step back from power and the shootings of pro-democracy demonstrators by soldiers during what became known as ‘Black May’ resulted in a major loss of legitimacy for the armed forces, and led to an intervention by the king, and eventually a restoration of democracy in 1992 (Freedman 2006: 32).

During the 14 years of democratic rule between 1992 and 2006, the role of the military was reduced from being at the center of power to a more traditional military role focusing on defense and security issues. The period between 1992 and 2006 was not only the longest period of Thai history without a military government, but also saw the implementation of various reforms increasing civilian oversight over the military apparatus. The constitution of 1997 clearly prohibited active militaries taking up positions in government or the senate, which led to a reduction of the military influence in government and legislature. It also made political neutrality a binding
principle of the military and thus ended military support for certain candidates and their political parties, which had been commonplace in Thailand. The Asian crisis of 1997/98 also triggered a 25 per cent reduction of the military budget and a growing determination of civilian institutions to scrutinize military procurement and to influence military promotion (Ockey 2001). In the context of a privatization of state enterprises in reaction to the Asian crisis, many military officers disappeared from boardrooms too.

While seemingly impressive, these were all ‘ad hoc’ reform initiatives, lacking a comprehensive reform strategy that contained the necessary structural reforms to sustain the aforementioned initiatives. The 25 per cent cut in the Thai military budget, for example, was not accompanied by a downsizing of the army or a reform of the army’s personnel structure (Thailand currently has over 1500 active generals) and corrupt promotion system. What is more, the doctrine of the Thai armed forces was left untouched, which has seriously undermined institution-centered reform initiatives aimed at the depoliticization of the military. The Thai military see themselves as the guardians of the monarchy and of a very patriarchal concept of democracy and ultimately as genuine political actors (Pongsudhirak 2008). Corresponding with its doctrine, the military’s operational tasks went far beyond external defense and included the provision of internal security, political stability, and national development. The institutional reforms undertaken in the period between 1992 and 2006 did not alter the military doctrine, nor did they advance changes in operational and structural terms.

What changed was that during elections many military men were replaced by civilians. Again, the majority of parliamentary seats were claimed by members of the business community through the use of local networks, money politics and sometimes even intimidation (Callahan 2005; Ungpakorn 2001). While the military’s retreat from power led to an opening of the political system, large parts of the population were de facto excluded from it as the prevalence of money politics made it hard for people without the necessary financial resources to win elections (Bungbonkarn 1996). At the same time, with 70 per cent of the voters living in rural areas, elections have been by and large decided by the rural electorate, where party identification, political ideology and national policy issues have played a minimal role vis-à-vis patron–client relationships (Laothamatas 1996). Hence the votes of the rural electorate became highly contested and vote buying became a common practice (Callahan 2005). While at least the formal power of the urban and rural poor increased during Thailand’s democratization, members of the middle class as well as the old, unelected elites became more and more disillusioned with a system they saw as falling prey to money politics and corruption. Hence the bureaucracy and the military found a base amongst the urban middle class in their criticism of Thailand’s parliamentary democracy as being run by corrupt, greedy politicians without any regard for what they perceived as the ‘public good’ (Laothamatas 1996: 220).
The Asian crisis in 1997 not only caused Thailand’s once booming economy to falter but at the same time led to new dynamics in the political sphere. Threatened by the IMF-imposed neoliberal economic reforms, which were seen as mainly targeting domestic businesses and the urban and rural poor while benefiting international capital, Thaksin Shinawatra, a business mogul, rose to power. His political agenda not only included nationalist (economic) sentiments and anti-globalization rhetoric, but also focused on agrarian debt relief and universal health care amongst other issues (Tejapira 2005: 197). Thaksin successfully mobilized the urban and rural subordinate groups by promising them a slew of new social policies and benefits (McCargo 2005: 516; Rodan and Jayasuriya 2009: 37). Out of this a cross-class coalition of business elites and the urban and rural poor emerged for the first time in Thai history. Initially even many progressive pro-democracy activists supported Thaksin for his resistance against neoliberalism and the establishment of what has been termed a ‘new social contract’ that included the rural and urban poor (Kitirianglarp and Hewison 2009).

But once in power, Thaksin’s policies turned more and more authoritarian. He showed more concern for strong leadership than for civil liberties and human rights, alienating many of his former supporters amongst the activist camp. Additionally, several government policies seemed to directly benefit his family’s companies. In particular the sale of Thaksin’s Shin Corporation to the Singaporean government in early 2006, tax free, pointed to what the middle class especially perceived as high levels of corruption. Thaksin also tried to promote military officers loyal to him, using the annual military reshuffles to politicize the promotion system (McCargo and Pathmanand 2005: 136). Such was the extent of Thaksin’s attempts to convert the military into a part of his power base that he even briefly installed one of his cousins, Chaisit Shinawatra, in the position of army commander. While Thaksin’s first cabinet had included a large number of high-ranking military men (McCargo and Pathmanand 2005: 134), his attempts to politicize the military’s promotion system brought him into open conflict with powerful factions of the armed forces. Conflict between Thaksin and the military increased further due to an escalation of the separatist conflict in the south. Thaksin’s disdain for a peaceful solution to the conflict in the south intensified the distrust of the Muslim minority and led to an escalation of violence (Pathmanad 2006).

Thaksin’s grip on power aimed at disempowering the old unelected elites: his attempts to overhaul the Thai democracy once dominated by the military and bureaucracy and to establish a one-party populist democracy backed by the rural poor provoked resistance amongst many different political players. Yet rural voters continued to support Thaksin, as some of his policies, such as the establishment of a universal health care system and village development funds, represented their interests. Because of the support of the rural majority for Thaksin, the diverse coalition of Thaksin
opponents, which had developed as a reaction against his increasingly authoritarian rule, was unable to remove Thaksin from power through the electoral process. Well organized rallies with hundreds of thousands participants in the capital Bangkok did not result in electoral victories. Quite the contrary, Thaksin’s Tai Rak Tai (TRT) party won a landslide reelection victory in 2005 as well as a snap election in April 2006. The latter was boycotted by the major opposition parties. Thaksin seemed unchallengeable by democratic means. However, allegations of electoral fraud led the king to intervene in favor of Thaksin’s opponents in 2006, calling the judiciary to investigate the allegations. The judiciary annulled the elections, calling for new elections in October 2006. Yet Thaksin seemed confident that his TRT would again win the upcoming elections and thus remain politically dominant. Amid a military reshuffle that would have allowed Thaksin to move even more officers loyal to him into important positions, a military coup seemed the only possible solution to safeguard the interests of the old elites (Hewison 2007: 242).

5. Conclusion

Some preliminary conclusions have emerged with regard to the research question posed, specifically how to explain the different behaviors of South-east Asian militaries vis-à-vis democratically elected governments. First of all, one can observe that changes concerning the military doctrines and the military’s self-perception as a genuine political actor have been scarce. In line with this observation, changes in operational and functional terms have been limited and reforms of the security sector have in general often been confined to ad hoc institutional engineering without comprising coherent structural reforms. Thus authoritarian prerogatives prevail in the hands of the military; it still holds powerful political influence, especially on security and defense policy-making. Civilian control of the security forces after the transition to democracy therefore remains limited. Even in Indonesia, civilian control of the military in reality seems to depend largely on the executive (read: on the president), and hence is more subjective than objective in character despite a successful removal of the TNI from political institutions. The military also continues to be involved in a variety of non-military affairs. But, and again risking over-generalization, such has been the case in all three countries. Therefore the fact that the depoliticization and professionalization of a military has not taken place does not explain the differences in military behavior vis-à-vis post-authoritarian governments.

This puzzle has brought about a need to move beyond explanatory factors such as ‘high levels of coercion’, ‘authoritarian prerogatives’ or ‘politcized doctrines’. By disbanding the (analytically useful) separation of military and political institutions, I came to study the underlying power structures, their transformation in the context of transition from authoritarianism to democracy, and the impact of these transformations
on the military’s predisposition to intervene in politics. My analysis suggests that the institutional autonomy of the military is only ‘relative’, as it is determined by the socio-economic power structures and their corresponding political institutions. Broadly speaking, the Philippines and Indonesia again bear some striking similarities to Thailand in this regard: their post-authoritarian political systems were the product of a compromise between the old, entrenched elites and the middle classes, effectively marginalizing more ‘radical’ reform demands. Democratization was brought about via an elite-run bargaining process between old elites and moderate reformers. The demise of authoritarianism has led to a reconfiguration of political power in the context of electoral politics. A slew of new and old elites now compete over access to political power via elections. Politics is no longer exclusively rendered vertically through the state apparatus, but increasingly through parties and the parliament. Yet at the same time the fact that the electoral process in all three countries has been dominated by money politics, as well as the often very gradual character of democratic reforms, ensured that many of the old, predatory elites managed to hold on to power. Consequently the political institutions remain by and large in the hands of very dynamic and often changing coalitions between politico-bureaucratic and business interests (Hadiz 2003; Sidel 1999), while social forces that might have demanded more comprehensive reforms, and therefore might have challenged the underlying socio-economic power structures, were marginalized. The military was forced from the centre stage of politics to a position at the margins, albeit never too far removed from political power, as the Thai case clearly illustrates. Within a new, more democratic system the armed forces managed to preserve many of their authoritarian prerogatives, mainly by serving as a power broker for new elite coalitions, or by forming alliances with different, often contentious political players themselves. Consequently, many former military men became co-opted into the new, democratic system.

Yet Thailand is exceptional in the sense that the Asian crisis in 1997 gave way to a new realignment of political power through a new social contract between business oligarchs and the rural and urban power personified by Thaksin and his TRT party. Hence the main difference between Thailand and its two neighbors lies in the fact that Thaksin successfully instrumentalized the electoral process to gain control over state institutions and resources (channels of appropriation, coercion, legitimacy etc.). Through Thaksin’s increasingly centralized grip on power and his more and more authoritarian politics, he alienated large parts of the old elites (bureaucracy, monarchy, and military), which had dominated Thai politics for decades, as well as some many of his former supporters. The post-authoritarian system that had served the interests of different (old and new) elite groups by allowing competition over political power through elections dominated by money politics and established government in the form of flexible and changing coalitions was challenged by Thaksin’s seemingly
all-encompassing grip on power. This did not exclude the military, as ‘he set out simply to convert the military into a direct source of political support, a major component of his powerbase’ (McCargo and Pathmanand 2005: 134). What made things worse was the fact that Thaksin’s backing by the rural majority made him irremovable by electoral means for the time being. This led his opponents to the conclusion that he could only be removed from power through extra-constitutional means.

Thus the main difference between Thailand and its two neighbors lies in the fact that the entrenched interests of the Thai oligarchy have been effectively challenged by a cross-class coalition led by Thaksin, which seemed to be able to capture the state via the electoral process to gain control over state institutions and resources. Confronted with a fundamental challenge of not only its institutional autonomy (i.e. through Thaksin’s attempts to politicize the promotion of officers) but of the underlying power structures that guaranteed its dominant position in the state, the military, backed by bureaucrats and tacitly supported by the monarchy, removed Thaksin from power in 2006.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to acknowledge financial support from the Fritz Thyssen Foundation.

Notes

1 Despite repeated efforts of civilian elites to instrumentalize the military for their personal political gains, especially with regard to the attempts of President Wahid to dissolve parliament with the support of the military in order to avoid impeachment (Kim et al. 2006: 261).


References


