

# The Polarization of Thai Democracy: The Asian Democracy Index in Thailand

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## Introduction

In recent years, explanation of Thailand's democratization has been subject to intense debate. Some political experts say that Thai politics is monopolized by a few groups of political elites (see for example Thitinan 2014). Others have argued that various politically influential movements exist in Thailand, including those that support elections and that oppose corruption. In this paper, we argue that Thai democracy is no longer a game of elites, but that to a certain but significant extent laypeople have become involved in different spheres to assert their political, economic, and social influence or, through the lens of Cho (2012), acted to de-monopolize power.

However, this does not mean that Thailand has become a consolidated democracy characterized by the process of *pluralization*. Rather, the influential small groups that still hold power within Thai society have tried to maintain and strengthen their political regime by excluding the majority from actively getting involved in the democratization process, especially those from rural areas. This has created a series of country-wide conflicts that characterizes the present situation of Thai society.

This binary opposition between the urban elites and middle class people on the one hand and the rural majority on the other has led the country's democratic transformation into a situation that we describe as *polarization*.

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Our Asian Democracy Index (ADI) survey data indicates that within this polarization, there still remain well-established and exclusive political and economic groupings that manage to maintain power within Thai society. At the same time, there are also movements of people that have struggled to shape the political, economic, and social transformations and withstand the old regime of powers in different ways.

To elaborate our argument based on our survey of key experts, our paper is divided into four parts. In the next section, we provide a brief background of Thai democracy with a focus on the period from September 2013 to January 2014, which is the period during which our survey took place. We then discuss our research method and assessment, and mention some of the difficulties we encountered during the conduct of our survey. The third section of this paper presents the findings of the survey, organized according to the fields of politics, economy, and civil society. In the final section, we provide some reflexive conclusions and recommendations for the development of Thai democratization through the lens of de-monopolization.

### **Brief Background of Thai Democracy from 2013 to Early 2014**

The Thai political system at present operates within the framework of a constitutional monarchy, whereby the prime minister is the head of government and a hereditary monarch is head of state. Thailand has a political history of long periods of authoritarianism alternating with periods of “semi-democratic” government (Naruemon 2012). Since the installation of the first representative government in 1932, the military has interrupted the constitutional order more than twenty times, with Thai citizens witnessing changes of government and eighteen written constitutions after the abolition of absolute monarchy. The most recent coup was in May 2014, when the elected government of Yingluck Shinawatra was overthrown by the military group known as the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO).

In 2013, Thai democracy and Thai politics was characterized in particular by regular street protests, and tarnished by intensifying conflicts caused both by political division and economic problems. Following the dispelling in November 2012 of the Pitak Siam’s rally, an ultra-nationalist and illiberal demonstration led by General Boonlert Keawprasit, another wave of street protests led by the People Democratic Reform Committee or PDRC emerged, initially opposing an unpopular blanket amnesty bill in October 2013 put forward by the Yingluck government. The PDRC movement later evolved to seek to overthrow the Yingluck government,

resulting in a protracted seven month protest that arguably paved the way for the May 2014 coup d'état.

Meanwhile, the Thai economy in 2013 experienced both a rising cost of living and tumbling prices of agricultural products resulting in street protests by agricultural workers, such as rubber plantation workers in the South of Thailand. Thus, on top of the political crises and apparent social divisions, the country was struggling with high debt levels, and consumer confidence was at its lowest point in nearly two years during the period of 2011–2012 (see more details in Somchai 2012). According to Somchai (2012), the political uncertainty exacerbated the downward economic cycle, especially for the tourism industry; Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported that thirty-seven countries had issued travel advisories for Thailand and that tourist groups were cancelling reservations.

In terms of Thailand's democracy, the oligarchic structure of Thai politics and economy has in essence remained in place. Most scholars argue that it is essential to solve democratic recession and to increase democratic culture for pluralist society in Thailand (for example, Diamond 2014). Thailand's bureaucracy has never entirely submitted to the instructions of elected parliament but instead co-exists side by side with elected politicians and economic elites.

On 9 December 2013, in the face of entrenched street protests by the PDRC and after all 153 opposition Democrat Party ministers of parliament (MPs) resigned from office, the Yingluck government dissolved the House of Representatives and called a snap general election. The snap election on 2 February 2014, however, was later terminated by the Constitutional Courts. The military intervened in response to the political conflicts and institutional deficit of representative democracy in Thailand.

## **Research Method and Assessment**

### **Data Collection**

This paper's data was collected through face-to-face interviews using the structured ADI questionnaires. A total of twenty-seven expert interviews were conducted, together with three pilot interviews. Each key informant was categorized according to two criteria:

- 1) By specific duty, namely: politicians and leaders of political movements; practitioners in civil society organizations; and academics in politics, economics, sociology, et cetera;
- 2) By their political ideology, namely right, left, and moderate, classified according to their positioning within Thailand's recent political conflict. The right are people who hold conservative ideas such as national pride and the uniqueness of being Thai, have a free-market orientation, support royal and elitist privileges, and have no confidence in elected politicians and the election at large. The left are people who hold up the idea of Thailand as a part of global cosmopolitanism, support state subsidization and social welfare (especially for the poor), promote civil rights, social transformation, and economic equality, and see elections as a mean to express their political will and engage with the political regime. Moderates are people who stand between the positions of the left and right, or who cannot fully describe themselves as strictly being within either wing.

The survey data was collected between September 2013 and January 2014. Since the survey was completed, the political situation in Thailand was confronted by a deepening political conflict, as discussed in the preceding section. Consequently, the data and findings of our research reflect the attitudes and opinion of experts who hold important roles in the Thai political system at a critical juncture of democracy in Thailand.

### Survey Limitations

The research process involved not only administering the quantitative aspects of the ADI questionnaires, but also qualitative aspects, which look into the expert's perception, comments, and reflections on the political situation in Thailand and the research method itself. The research team experienced several difficulties during the interview, which are summarized below.

Half of the interviewees indicated difficulty in placing their answers as quantitative values along a scale of zero to ten to reflect their opinion on indicators of Thai democratization. Some experts said that each degree from zero to ten had different meanings. Others said that this tool reflected only the individual's attitude to choose a number, and that different experts held different levels of attitude. In other words, there could be inconsistency in the data between experts that might not reveal a real degree of measurement.

In addition, most key informants stated that the Asian Democracy Index cannot itself prove the presence or absence of democracy. This is due to the fact that the ADI can only reflect a trend of political development, but cannot be taken to imply the actual absolute state of the political system. Even if some ADI indicators receive a low score, it does not necessarily mean that the country is not a democracy. Rather, it reflects a low degree of democratic process.

Some respondents also critiqued the questions themselves, stating that some questions embodied complexities that could not be reflected numerically. For example, the question regarding freedom of the media in Thailand was flagged as being complex, as the respondent was required to consider which topic the media is covering; in general, a participant might be inclined to choose, say, a score of seven or eight, yet for a particular topic, e.g., reporting on the real circumstance of issues related to the monarchy, the number might be closer to one or two.

In the case of some questions regarding the autonomy of civil society, and questions about the pluralization of the economy, some experts were confused because the numerical score did not seem compatible with other questions that required a high number to indicate a democratic condition and low number to reflect an illiberal one; The problem was that those questions took a high number as reflective of a condition of monopoly and a low number of a condition of equality. Based on this observation, it was encouraged that the reliability of the questionnaire be carefully considered.

Finally, some participants stated that it was hard to understand questions about the government's support because the government did not really help people who were owed entitlements by right. Rather, support is provided through the "mercy" of elected politicians, who act to give something back to their local constituencies. Thus, as a consequence of political patronage, several social policies and forms of welfare are more accurately described as gifts given after the election rather than an actual intervention by the government.

After considering all of difficulties carefully, the research team addressed these problems by clarifying several questions into a simple scale that the participants were comfortable to indicate a mark in response to. If the interviewee was unable to pick a numerical degree, the researcher instead received their comments and opinions instead.

## Research Findings

### The Thai Political Field

According to Berja (2013), democratization as a process of “demonopolization” can be assessed through evaluating three themes: redistribution of power and resources; a political system as rational formation; and the dynamics of political institutions. The political situation and democracy in Thailand from 2013 to early 2014 faced a critical juncture. In this paper, we evaluate the Thai political field according to the four ADI subprinciples, namely autonomy, competition, pluralization, and solidarity (see table 1).

Table 1. Thai Politics Index

Autonomy	5.85
Competition	4.82
Pluralization	4.25
Solidarity	4.32
Average	4.81

Amongst the political principles, the measure of autonomy is highest. However, as the score is only 5.83, it appears to reflect that there is a perception among the experts of moderation regarding the liberty of people and political groups. In other words, the experts generally believe that people are only partially protected from state violations and manipulation.

Amongst the subprinciples, the highest scores that contributed toward the political autonomy score are those for the indicators concerning the permissibility of political opposition in the country. Within the Thai political situation in 2013, there were a lot of emerging political groups established as anti-government groups, not only in parliament but also outside of the formal government system. Although many groups had

their own direction and strategy to oppose the government, they moved in general under the banner of the PDRC movement, which was also had informal links to the Democrat party.

On the other hand, the lowest score under autonomy is for the indicator concerning civil rights, implying that there are threats to political freedoms in Thailand, including threats to freedom of expression and freedom to protest. The Thai government in 2013 and early 2014 did not readily open space for the anti-government groups, as reflected by the fact that it has been enforcing the Internal Security Act since October 2013. The law was criticized for limiting civil rights and for not being compatible with the principles of modern democracy, where civil rights should be protected as a priority.

Regarding political competition, the overall score was 4.82, which is quite low. This suggests that political power belongs to only a few people or groups. The data reflects a claim by anti-government people and political groups that the government and parliament was a “the tyranny of majority.” These groups claimed that elected politicians from the Pheu Thai (PT) party who won the last election did so through “pork barrel” politics. These PT MPs then used the power of majority that they won in parliament to clean their records by approving the Amnesty Bill, which was the starting point of the anti-government movement in 2013.

As regards the indicators under political competition, the highest score was given for the presence of non-elected hereditary power. This reflects the monopolized political power of the minority of non-elected politicians such as Privy Council, the military, and conservative non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These groups are referred to by the Red Shirt movement, which supports the PT government, as *ammatt* (elites). These non-elected powers try to balance Thailand’s electoral political system—which they claim is manipulated—in the name of the “good man” rather than the elected one. The unelected authorities control over politics, economic, and social spaces is in line with Alfred Stepan’s description of the “new professionalism” of the military, i.e., their role in maintaining internal security and national development (2001, 23-28).

The lowest indicator score in the competition subprinciple is for transparency. This is reflective of the general view of our key informants toward the government’s actions and decisionmaking in policy processes. Some of those interviewed said that there is a lot of corruption in policy-making and the implementation of the PT government. For example, the government has been criticized for its rice pledging scheme, which was a pricing policy that set the domestic price of paddy rice at more than 30-50

percent above the international market value, subsidized by the government. The government spent more than THB 200 billion to support the scheme, and the scheme itself has been accused of being an avenue for corruption (Einhorn, 2013). The rice pledging scheme reduced Thailand's rice exports; Thailand was previously the world's largest rice exporter, but in 2013-2014 India and Vietnam exported larger quantities of rice.

Political pluralization scored 4.25, which is the lowest among the four subprinciples. It indicates that experts think that Thailand's political organizations do not have diversity and that power is monopolized by central political institutions. The data also thus indicates that decentralization and balance of power among a diversity of groups is not sustained in the Thai political system.

The highest score among pluralization's indicators is that of the democratization of state institutions. This indicator score suggests that Thailand's political institutions can be held accountable and criticized by the public over controversial issues and national agenda. The public has indeed been able to follow the PT government's action via the media, and some members of the public have been actively involved in anti-government protests via the PDRC movement. However, the score is still lower than 5, which means that there is still confrontational politics between the government and the counter-government movements. However, some experts said that the anti-government movements did not really take an anti-corruption or anti-tyranny of the majority stance, saying that such movements took an anti-election position instead.

The lowest-scoring indicator under political pluralization was independence of and the checks and balances among the state's apparatuses of power. This means that according to our informants, political power has been monopolized by a few groups on both political sides, which include elected politicians and non-elected elites. Recent events reveal that the general public cannot easily hold decisionmakers accountable for their actions. On the one hand, elected politicians implemented populist policies (such as the one tablet per child and tax reduction for first cars) that were targeted at the white-collar public, whilst at the same time trying to pass an Amnesty Bill that would apply to the past political actions of all politicians and activists equally. On the other hand, non-elected elites have used extraordinary politics to topple the elected government, including supporting the PDRC movement to oppose new elections and the voice of the voting majority. These conflicts that reflect the interest of just a few groups competing against each other—and that mobilize large groups of



people—leave other members of the public forced to choose between elected politicians accused of corruption and non-elected elites that undermine their basic civil rights, including their right to suffrage.

Finally, as regards political solidarity, the 4.32 average score of that subprinciple suggests a deficit of political unity in Thai politics. Some experts stated that Thais still do not believe in the democratic parliamentary process as a means toward solving political problems. They said that Thai democracy cannot be consolidated because many people want to solve political conflicts through extraordinary measures, thus democracy is not the only game in town in Thailand. For example, an anti-government political movement blocked the snap elections held on 2 February 2014 under the banner “Reform before Election,” implying that these protesters did not trust either the elected politicians or the voices of majority who live in the rural areas.

Although the highest scores under political solidarity were for the indicators concerning public credibility of a democratic institutions and the public attitude towards democratic participation, these scores were still lower than 5. Some of the interviewed experts stated that Thai people looked toward democracy only during ordinary times, but that they can change their position during extraordinary times, such as during an economic crisis, a political deadlock, or a natural disaster. During these periods, our experts suggested that Thai people thought that elected politicians cannot solve the problems arising from such situations, thus the public calls upon non-elected institutions, especially the military, to help them. The arguments of these experts are reflective of the discourses that have emerged around the May 2014 coup in Thailand.

The lowest score under political solidarity is for affirmative action, which is lower than 4. This indicates that the experts generally think that the government cannot ensure entitlements for marginalized people. In fact, Thailand’s 2007 Constitution contains many sections that could support marginalized and indigenous people, but there are not yet organic laws to transform these constitutional provisions into actionable public policy. For instance, when Yingluck, the first female prime minister of Thailand, came into power, her government promoted “The National Fund for Women Development”; the Yingluck government proposed to establish a fund to develop women totaling THB 100 million per province. However, this policy was criticized by some as populist.

In conclusion, regarding the four ADI subprinciples in the political field, it can be said that Thailand’s political system is built on the fragile foundations of democracy. Even though political autonomy obtained a

score above 5, the other three subprinciples (competition, pluralization, and solidarity) still scored lower than 5.

### The Thai Economic Field

Although Thailand's political situation in the period covered can be characterized as a critical stage of democracy, Thailand's economy in the same period maintained its path toward economic liberalization (NESDB 2013). Many scholars, such as Pasuk (2013) and Somchai (2012), have argued that Thailand is caught in a "middle income trap." According to Pasuk and Pornthep (2013), Thailand has faced increasing competition from lower income countries, yet has been unable to raise its per capita income to that of a high income country, thus resulting in the slowdown of its economic growth over the past decade.

Thailand's export-led development strategy based on cheap labor, foreign direct investment in light industry, and a supportive state brought about a generally impressive growth performance despite the severe crisis that hit the economy in 1997. As a result, Thailand was "upgraded" by the World Bank from a lower-middle income economy to an upper-middle income one in 2011. To progress beyond the existing labor-intensive production and export-orientated development model, Thailand has tried unsuccessfully to date to move toward knowledge-based and innovation-based products.

Economic inequality has been considered as a key obstacle to Thailand's moves toward improving the Thai people's livelihood and standard of living. From an economic perspective, sustained economic growth and political stability would allow people to benefit from market opportunities, since, in theory, the increase in revenue allows the government to provide better public goods. Although the discourse of the necessity of "economic reform"—e.g., in the form of taxation reform and better income distribution—has been discussed by economists for a while (such as those in the Thailand Development Research Institute, cited in Parista 2011), no concrete policy or practice has been adopted based on the statements of these economic reform advocates.

In the rest of this section, the ADI subprinciples of autonomy, competition, pluralization, and solidarity in the economic field for Thailand in 2013 are discussed in detail (see table 2).

Table 2. Thai Economy Index

Autonomy	4.49
Competition	4.69
Pluralization	3.45
Solidarity	4.65
Average	4.32

We start with economic autonomy. This subprinciple contemplates economic freedom from state interference, the protection of labor rights, and the autonomy of economic policies from external forces. The aggregate score for economic autonomy is 4.49, which indicates the existence of oligarchic politics and the intervention of the state in economic policies. Problems associated with the low economic autonomy score are exacerbated in Thailand by the evolution of local power structures (made up of local influential businessmen and the bureaucracy) shaped by the context of the new two-party national political system, within which influential individuals seek to retain their wealth and power. By sending their family members or their friends to run as MPs, as well as for local positions in different local government levels, there has been a consolidation of power and wealth in local politics that undermines fair competition both in political and economic activities (Pasuk and Phornthep 2013). Within private enterprises, the protection of labor rights is favorably evaluated by our informants, who spoke positively of the “300 baht minimum wage,” which has helped improve labor conditions and reduce wage inequality, even though such benefits are limited to the formal sector. The process of determining the minimum wage nevertheless is limited to only a small group of employers, government officials, and workers who are indirectly elected through labor organizations. In other words, the minimum wage is set almost solely by a few employers and government officers.

We move on now to economic competition, which contemplates economic transparency, fairness in the economy, government responsibility, and corporate responsibility. The survey score for this subprinciple is

4.69, which is higher than the score for economic autonomy but is still lower than 5. The reasons for this relatively low score include inequality of education for preparing workers for the market and economic monopolization in the telecommunications and energy sectors.

Although Thailand has a market-oriented economic system, it still faces the problem of economic monopoly resulting in economic inequality that disrupts economic growth and increases political instability. A bureaucratic polity linked to the power of the military was established since the 1930s and continued for over fifty years. However, the 1997 Constitution allowed new forces to emerge, including a new center of power led by the Shinawatra family, which focused on populist and short-term policies. This new form of electoral democracy has, however, not yet instigated a process of institutional reforms that would pave the way for a more sustainable egalitarian and democratic society.

In terms of economic transparency and government/corporate responsibility, there are some monopolized business groups that have a close connection with the government and that link major power networks together to form an oligarchy. This includes business networks that can influence the direction of Thailand's energy policies, e.g., partial privatizations that created semi-public semi-private organizations where the parent company has the status of public enterprise (e.g., the cases of the PTT Public Limited Company and the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand) but that also owns many affiliate organizations that are legally defined as private enterprises. This type of company enjoys the privileges of a state enterprise that are provided by law as well as many of the advantages of a private enterprise, such as investment incentives and exemptions from the Finance Ministry's rules and regulations on executives' salaries, net profit allocations, and the duty to return profits to the government.

Let us now focus on economic pluralization. This subprinciple is concerned with the fair distribution of economic resources, and includes measures of economic monopoly, regional disparity, income equality, asset disparity, and employment equality. Based on our survey data, the aggregate score of economic pluralization is 3.45, which is the lowest among all the economic subprinciple scores. This is because, in the eyes of our informants, decisionmaking power is centralized and monopolized by a few elites, who hold on to power both in political institutions and economic organizations.

Despite being considered an upper-middle income country and an overall improving standard of living, disparity of income between the poor and the rich remains substantial in Thailand, which has led to economic

and social inequalities. Due to a slow economic growth-cum-recession and political conflicts over the past ten years, many economists and political scholars have started to investigate the problem of inequality in income, wages, and education. According to Pasuk Pongpaichit and Pornthep Benjaapikul (2013), inequality in Thailand, as measured by the Gini coefficient of household consumption expenditure, has improved very little, while the Gini coefficient of household income has increased steeply and is getting worse over the past two decades.

Lastly, let us tackle economic solidarity. This subprinciple includes social security systems, labor unions activities, corporate surveillance and awareness of inequality alleviation. The aggregate economic solidarity score is 4.65, which means that there is moderate support for social welfare and social security from the government.

As mentioned in the assessment of economic autonomy, the state's policy of a 300-baht minimum wage across the country has helped improve peoples' livelihood and has reduced economic inequality. The extension of the national health coverage scheme has also helped in improving the living condition of Thais. According to the National Health Security Office (NHSO 2012, 21), more than 90 percent of Thai citizens are covered by a healthcare scheme. While the Universal Health Care scheme—also known as the 30 baht healthcare scheme—provides coverage for 47.7 million people, another 4.9 million civil servants and state enterprise workers are covered under separate health and pension schemes provided by the government, and around 9.9 million employed workers in the formal sector are covered under the social security system, which may develop to include a pension scheme in the future (NHSO 2012, 14-20). However, it should be noted that the "Universal" Health Care scheme does not cover migrant workers; it is limited only to Thai citizens with identification cards.

Regarding trade unions in Thailand, most workers in the country are factory-based rather than industry-based, which weakens the bargaining power of industrial workers. The weak bargaining power of labor, according to Phonthep and Pokpong (2013), has decreased the ratio of labor's cost (minimum wage) to output in many sectors. Still, the growing awareness and concern over high income inequality and the persistence of social and economic hierarchies are increasingly discussed, contributing to political conflicts and social division over the last ten years. Despite some initiatives—again, including the 300-baht minimum wage—no real solutions or practical projects have been implemented to tackle these serious problems.

In sum, the Thai political system, which has previously been characterized as being defined by oligarchic politics or rule by the few, has clearly impacted the country's economic activities. Over the past five decades, the country's economic policies have continually been driven by faith in economic trickle-down policies. Successive governments have turned rural agriculture from a largely self-sufficient sector into a manufacturing sector under an export-oriented policy. Although Thailand is now thought of as an upper-middle income economy, the ADI survey data shows that a small number of privileged groups enjoy disproportionate access to power and are the principle beneficiaries of the country's economic development. There is a growing agreement that the country can no longer rely on its current model of economic development and there is an emerging debate on what should replace this model. Although there is no consensus on any solution, most people agree that the new model should incorporate social concerns, fair distribution (of income, wages, education, social provisions) and more democratic participation in the economic sphere.

### The Thai Civil Society Field

For the past few decades, the emergence and the active role of civil society—ranging from the increasing number of NGOs, the nationwide social movements, public expression and the involvement of active citizens in many social and political issues, as well as the use of social media in spreading a wide range of information and criticism of authorities—have been pivotal to Thailand's democratization. While the rise of civil society, to a certain extent, has been part of the changing political atmosphere that allows greater freedom of expression and resistance to unjust policies, some scholars also see that the proliferation of civil society to have, in turn, helped create the social conditions wherein the process of demonopolization can be initiated and strengthened at the truly grassroots level (Pasuk 1999, Ukrist 2001).

Rapid economic development has led the Thai government to focus on sustaining and expanding the country's industrialization processes. State-financed infrastructure and mega-projects have been extensively implemented in rural Thailand, where natural resources are abundant and could be employed in supporting growing industries (Fahn 2003). State-financed projects like dams, electricity-generating plants, superhighways, industrial estates, and deep-sea ports have been flourishing throughout

the rural regions, while private companies have also encroached agricultural lands and forests for the expansion of their industrial production capacities. Such economic aggrandizement has created waves of tensions between the state and private companies on the one hand and local people on the other. In many cases, basic human and community rights have been violated and villagers' access to natural resources has been obstructed by the state's top-down regulation and controls (Missingham 2003). Amidst these conflicts, representative democracy has been perceived by many development-affected people as insufficient in guaranteeing their rights, livelihood security, and emerging rural aspirations (see Jakkrit 2013 and Walker 2012). With the rise of NGOs working in development-related fields, there are some who hope that civil society can open up greater public space and better allow the voices of the marginalized to be heard, thus helping them to create fairer deals with the aforementioned public and private entities.

Table 3. Thai Civil Society Index

Autonomy	4.79
Competition	4.92
Pluralization	5.06
Solidarity	4.57
Average	4.83

As can be gleaned from table 3, when examined vis-à-vis the scores in the other ADI fields, Thailand's civil society index is ranked the highest in terms of overall average de-monopolization score. It can be said that there is some optimism among our informants, who generally think that civil society can be a leading force in fostering de-monopolization in the country. However, there are also some limitations and skepticism toward civil society's role in the democratization process. Even though civil society ranked the highest among the three field-specific sets of subprinciples, its

average score is still low at 4.83. That is to say that civil society in itself has been experiencing several challenges that emerged both within and from outside the circle of civil society. When looking closely at how our key experts perceived the status and roles of civil society in terms of the ADI subprinciples, civil society pluralization ranked the highest, with a score of 5.06, while the lowest is that of civil society solidarity at 4.57. It is interesting to point out that both pluralization and solidarity are subprinciples of the ADI principle called equalization. In other words, there are some paradoxical attributes in the process of creating equality within civil society. This paradox is important as, to a certain extent, it reflects the strengths and limitations of Thai civil society, especially in terms of its capacity to work toward de-monopolization. We will elaborate on this issue when we highlight and analyze some of the challenging attributes within each subprinciple of civil society.

Under autonomy, civil society received a medium-ranked evaluation in comparison to those of the political and economic fields, though the score it received, 4.79, is still quite low. The most important achievements within civil society in Thailand are perceived to be tolerance toward social and cultural differences, the freedom of citizens to organize social activities, and the provision of basic needs for most Thais. These three attributes are essential in allowing members of Thai society to express their identity and ideology without interference from the state, corporations, and their fellow citizens. Our experts suggested that when the citizens' basic needs are sufficiently met, they can then engage more with public interest issues and form networks of concerned citizens, which will in turn strengthen the role and autonomy of civil society in fostering the de-monopolization process.

On a more critical note, some of the experts commented that the autonomy of civil society is still very much based on the freedom granted by the government. In addition, the success of several NGOs' advocacy depends very much on the interpersonal relationships between these organizations' leaders and key policymakers within bureaucratic circles and, to certain extent, with some business conglomerates. This is not to mention the emergence of many NGOs that are social enterprises, working partly in accordance with business logic. With this kind of state-business-NGO entanglement, sometimes it is difficult to clearly identify the scope, status, and autonomy of civil society in Thailand.

Civil society competition obtained a score of 4.92, which is higher than the competition scores in politics and economy. This might be a result of the influence and observable impacts that NGOs have had on society. NGOs in Thailand have been actively working on many development issues such as environmental protection, human and community's



rights, ethnic and women empowerment, food security, and energy and resource management. Many NGOs working on these issues have been successful in inserting their concerns and agenda into the official policy-making process, or have at least raised awareness about these issues among the general public. However, some of our experts commented that such advocacies were mostly based on the initiatives of funding agencies rather than representing real public interests. Thus, the average score given to the indicators on the public good and transparency of NGOs is quite low (4.62). In addition, competition among NGOs has led to another dilemma—the lack of solidarity among civil society organizations working on similar social issues. We will detail this dilemma later.

Based on our survey data, civil society pluralization is the most “successful” subprinciple in the civil society field. However, even though the roles and activities of NGOs in Thailand have recently diversified—as reflected by the 5.06 average score in the indicator contemplating these roles and activities—some NGOs prefer to limit their role to advocacy. Another concern under civil society pluralization is media and the circulation of information within society. The media has largely been criticized for their bias and lack of professionalism in reporting the news. There is also a lot of self-censorship and intervention from powerful figures in media circles. News reporters and journalists were described by some of our experts as being one-sided, lacking ethics, and inconsiderate when presenting the news, especially via the daily newspapers.

Civil society solidarity is the least “successful” among the subprinciples in the civil society field, obtaining a score of 4.57. This is probably the most challenging factor; the lack of solidarity in this field is hampering civil society from acting as a “fostering field” in the de-monopolization/democratization process. During the past few decades, NGOs have mushroomed and have been actively working in many development-related issues throughout the country. As previously mentioned, this plurality has also led to competition among NGOs and other social groups working on similar fields and issues. Because most of Thai NGOs rely so much on outside financial support, and because they have focused mainly on advocacy and research rather than on fund-raising activities, these NGOs have found themselves trapped in development aids competition. The competition and, in many cases, tension also led some of these NGOs to claim people and areas as their “territory,” prohibiting other organizations to “enter” therein and work with them toward achieving common aims. This competition among the NGOs is what has mainly impeded the creation of solidarity within Thai civil society.

In sum, when looking at Thailand's civil society using ADI indicators, we found that civil society has been perceived as the most advanced in the de-monopolization process. The diversification of social groups, media, and especially NGOs working on different social issues has been viewed as a strength of Thai civil society, as reflected by civil society pluralization's relatively high score. Still, there are some limitations and challenges within Thai civil society itself, especially as regards cooperation and solidarity among the active agents therein. It cannot be denied that civil society in Thailand has been "activated" and has played an important role in creating open spaces and shaping democratic culture in Thai society. What needs to be tackled is how to improve this activation. Based on our interviews, we believe that the increase in people's real participation, the articulation and better sharing of information, and better cooperation among civil society organizations are the keys to achieving that development. Amidst the ongoing political conflicts and the current authoritarian regime, civil society needs to work harder together toward creating a liberal atmosphere for society rather than competing for organizational benefits or limiting their roles only to certain development issues.

### **Conclusion**

The overall ADI score of Thailand for 2013 is 4.65 (see table 4). This score suggests that Thailand's level of democracy is still very low and progress towards deepening democracy through de-monopolization is making little progress. While the nationwide political conflicts and street violence in Bangkok and other large cities in recent years have obviously disrupted the process of democratization, they are only the tip of an undemocratic iceberg that has long accumulated in Thai society. Thailand is recognized as a recently industrialized country with a relatively liberal economic policy, a development strategy that emphasizes the role of the private sector alongside state subsidization for community enterprises and the agro-industrial sectors. The process of liberalization, especially in the economy, was perceived positively by many foreign investors, the international press and international organizations, as well as by many Thai citizens themselves.

Today, however, the notion that economic liberalization will bring prosperity to the people in general and help stimulate the conditions where political participation and sustainable livelihoods can be achieved is increasingly under scrutiny. It can be seen that in many regards the relationship between liberalization and equalization is a kind of zero-sum situation where the advancement of (economic) liberalization came at the

cost of social and political equalization in 2013-2014. In other words, the advancement of Thailand's economic liberalization was not accompanied by the advancement of political liberalization in the country, which has created problems and tensions, especially when centrally planned economic policy and development projects are deemed to threaten the livelihood of local people.

This skeptical view of liberalization is also reflected in the scores given by our experts, who ranked the overall liberalization of the country at 4.92 on a 0-10 scale. After several decades of economic liberalization, from the perspective of the interviewed experts, it is ironic that the economic regime of the country is probably the most troublesome of the three fields evaluated in the study. It is civil society that was ranked highest by the experts, followed by the political field. Meanwhile, the economic situation in Thailand reveals that even as the country is now considered an upper-middle income country, decades of market-oriented liberalization cannot really be considered successful as it has created inequality among different groups of people, not only in economic terms but also in political and civil society terms.

While liberalization has been evaluated skeptically, the rating thereof is still higher than that of equalization, which received an aggregate score of 4.38 (see table 5). Based on this data, we can state that Thailand's demonopolization process has been moving more toward liberalization rather than toward equalization. From our survey, when looking closely at the equalization principle, the lowest score is in the field of the economy. As mentioned above, the shortcomings of the economic liberalization process in Thailand during the past decades have resulted in a wide variety of inequalities. Economic inequality can be observed in the many persistent economic problems that Thailand is encountering today, including labor's lack of autonomy and rights, the centrally planned economic policies, the lack of transparency in corporate operations and the relationship of corporations with the government, the domination of a few business conglomerates in many sectors, and the income disparity between different regions of the country as well as the lack of a long-term system of support for farmers and the poor. This lack of equalization in the economic field, we argue, has been the basis for the social discrimination and political favoritism in Thai society which, in turn, has led to the creation of a national political divide and the polarization of society at large.

Table 4. Summary of ADI Scores in Thailand

	Politics	Economy	Civil Society	Average	Thai ADI Score
Liberalization	Autonomy	4.49	4.79	5.04	4.65
	Competition	4.69	4.92	4.81	
Equalization	Pluralization	3.45	5.06	4.25	
	Solidarity	4.32	4.57	4.51	
	Average	4.81	4.83		

Political equalization in Thailand scored 4.28, which, while a little bit higher than equalization in the economic field, is still quite low. As discussed above, the most problematic aspects perceived in Thailand's political regime regards the process of pluralization. Thai politics have been criticized for the lack of an effective check and balance system. Some people view parliamentary politics as filled with corrupted politicians who use populist policies to gain votes from amongst the majority rural population. This skepticism toward checks and balances and partisan politics have resulted in elite groups and the middle class opposing elections, claiming that Thailand is not yet ready for such a system as most of the citizens are poor and uneducated, thus their votes can easily be brought with a small amount of money and short-term benefits. From the perspective of these people, the way to solve the problems of corrupted politics is for the system to be reformed by "good and qualified" people—implying the aristocracy—instead of allowing everyone to have an equal voice in governing the political system. Needless to say, this contradicts the aspiration, of the majority population of the country, who see representative democracy and elections as a channel for them to get involved in shaping policy.

Table 5. Liberalization and Equalization in Thailand

	Politics	Economy	Civil Society	Average
Liberalization	5.33	4.59	4.85	4.92
Equalization	4.28	4.05	4.81	4.38
Average	4.80	4.30	4.83	

The political conflicts in Thailand that have been ongoing for the past several years have emerged over the divergent positions on how the country should be governed. Of course, such division has also been influenced by the inequality and failure of liberalization, especially in the economic and political spheres. Thailand will have to continue to endure this division for at least the next few years as polarization has deepened because of the recent coup. We conclude that the only means to overcome

the country's polarization is not the cessation of democratic activities and the reform of Thailand toward authoritarianism. Rather, the process of democratization can only be achieved through the de-monopolization of the political, economic, and civil society spheres, leading to a condition wherein people can constructively engage the state to shape a fairer society together.

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