

## **Economic Crisis, Poverty, and the Emergence of Populism in Thailand\***

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*Of the three Asian crisis economies that went under the International Monetary Fund (IMF)'s stewardship, only Thailand has experienced a populist backlash. This study explores why the country opted for populism in the 2001 general election. It shows that absolute poverty was responsible for the rise of Thaksin's populism. In more detail, the so-called Thaksin fever was strongly correlated to the region's post-crisis poverty level, excepting the southern region. This study also tentatively concludes that, even though political variables such as political deinstitutionalization do not explain the establishment of a populist government, they still may explain its absence.*

**Keywords:** *Populism, Neoliberalism, Poverty, Political Deinstitutionalization, Thaksin*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

A newly founded "populist" party scored a landslide victory against the coalition government led by neoliberalist Chuan Leekpai in the 2001 general election in Thailand. Such outright victory of "populism" was a big surprise considering that the country had thus far played the role of an internationally renowned model student of neoliberalism since receiving emergency rescue loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) during the 1997 Asian economic crisis. Prior to the event, neoliberalism championed by the IMF had not encountered any serious challenge from policymakers in Thailand and other crisis-hit Asian countries. In other words, neoliberalism had been considered to be the only game in town in Asian crisis economies, rapidly taking over the Asian growth model (World Bank 1993) that had previously been highly touted.

This study explores why Thailand's neoliberal reform eventually experienced a sudden "populist" backlash. Before introducing what I call a populist program, this paper first provides a brief summary of the extraordinary election results of 2001, which created a majority party in parliament for the first time in Thai democracy's modern history. Considering the various, opposing, and even negative meanings of populism (Taggart 2000; Conniff 1999; Dornbusch and Edwards 1991b), it subsequently presents the features of Thailand's populism as an alternative economic policy regime that contends seriously with neoliberalism.<sup>1</sup> This section will help avoid unnecessary misunderstandings about the

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\* This work was supported by the faculty research fund of Konkuk University in 2004. Earlier versions of this study were presented at the conference on "Asian Political Economy in an Era of Globalization," Dartmouth College in May 2002, and also at the third Korean-Thai Political Scientists' Dialogue at Sailom Hotel, Hua Hin, Thailand in July 2003. The author thanks, among others, David Kang, John Gerring, Amara Pongsapich, Jung Bock Lee, Yong Ho Kim, Thitinan Pongsudhirak and two anonymous referees for their helpful comments.

<sup>1</sup> This study does not deny that a particular government in reality may implement both neoliberal and populist programs. Once elected, a populist might also introduce some neoliberal policies, even if his populist policy platform has helped put him in office. This is especially true in the age of

otherwise quite controversial term. This is followed by successive discussion of two alternative explanations for the rise of Thailand's populism, both of which draw on the Latin American literature on populism. The final section concludes with a summary of key findings.

## 2. LANDSLIDE VICTORY OF POPULISM: THE 2001 GENERAL ELECTION

Thaksin Shinawatra and his populist party, Thai Rak Thai (TRT), scored a landslide victory in the January 2001 general election. Of the 500 parliamentary seats, the newly founded TRT won 248. In contrast, the Democrat Party (DP), which led the coalition government and also was the only time-honored party in volatile Thai politics, gained only 128 (Table 1). The sudden rise of the new TRT was a remarkable event, considering that one of the 23 TRT cofounders projected at its foundation that it would be a mid-size party winning 20 or 30 seats in the election (*Nation* 7/15/1998). The party had indeed remained out of public sight until September 1999 when Thaksin barely beat Chuan in an opinion poll for Prime Ministership conducted by the Bangkok University's Krungthep Poll Research Center among people in Bangkok and nearby (*Bangkok Post* 9/14/1999).

In the election, Thai voters were given two ballots for the first time according to a newly institutionalized electoral system: one for parties under proportional representation (PR) in a single nationwide constituency, and the other for individual candidates under single-member simple plurality rule. As a consequence, there were two different election results. Regardless of electoral rules, however, the TRT obtained a virtual majority of parliamentary seats. Thus, the party became the first party that had ever broken Thailand's long-established tradition of partisan proliferation and fragmentation, which had so far resulted in democratic instability.

**Table 1.** Results of Thailand's January 2001 General Election

	January 2001		November 1996
	District	PR	
TRT	200	48	-
Seritham	14	0	4
New Aspiration	28	8	125
Chart Thai	35	6	39
Chart Pattana	22	7	52
Democrat Party	97	31	123
Social Action	1	0	20
Thai Motherland	1	0	-
Others	0	0	30
Total	400	100	393

Source: Alpha Research Company (1999), *Bangkok Post* (2/2/2001), *Associated Press Newswires* (2/2/2001).

neoliberalism. In this study, Thaksin is characterized as populist in that he advocated the three key economic programs in Section 3 that set him apart from Chuan.

### 3. NEOLIBERALISM VERSUS POPULISM: CONTENDING POLICY PACKAGES

The sudden victory of the TRT is due, not exclusively but largely, to its appealing populist platform. Notwithstanding charges that Thaksin and his party played money politics by buying votes and luring candidates from other parties by irresistible financial offers, the election was certainly the first time that Thai political parties had ever appealed to voters with contradictory policy packages, namely, populism and neoliberalism. One might argue that the populist platform was not the only factor in the election that played a determinate role in the voters' choice; for instance, Thaksin's personality and wealth also played a certain role in the TRT's victory. One might also question the credibility of Thaksin's challenge to neoliberalism by arguing that the billionaire and business tycoon is a neoliberalist in disguise of a populist. However, the huge lead of TRT over the DP would be difficult to explain without reference to the TRT's populist platform. Even though the Democrats questioned the feasibility of Thaksin's populist programs, which they believed would worsen the already deteriorating budget deficit, they could not prevent a strong populist backlash against neoliberalism.

Thaksin's so-called national populism aims to redefine Thailand's economic development regime. It has emerged as an antithesis to Chuan's earlier neoliberalism. These two development paradigms are different from each other in the following three key aspects. First, the Chuan government embraced globalization and its concomitants such as liberalization, smaller government, and free market, without much hesitation. It believed that the prime source of post-crisis development finance should be foreign investment, and it also considered exports as the prime engine that should drive economic growth. For this purpose, it made great efforts to regain foreign investors' confidence. In contrast, Thaksin's populism is a relatively more inward-oriented economic development regime, which he believes will make his country less vulnerable to abrupt changes in the international business environment. It is not so enthusiastic about hosting foreign investment and promoting exports as the pre-crisis developmental state model or Chuan's neoliberalism. Even though it still prefers to leave Thai economy open to foreign investment as before, it wants to put greater emphasis on boosting domestic demand and prefers to phase out export-driven economic growth. According to Thaksin, "Past governments worked inside-out. This must change to become outside-in where society's needs are implemented and addressed by the state" (*Bangkok Post* 1/30/2001).

Second, embracing a trickle-down theory, the Chuan government focused its policies on strengthening the modern economy sector, especially, the financial sector, as opposed to agriculture. It was willing to spend billions of baht to buttress the crumbling banking system, but was reluctant to provide subsidies for the rural economy. According to Wibullak Ruamrak, chief of the Trade Negotiation Department at the Commerce Ministry of Chuan's cabinet, "Subsidies are like narcotics which only make them [farmers] addicted" (*Bangkok Post* 2/20/2000). On the other hand, in national populism, the agricultural sector, as opposed to the modern sector including the financial sector, has a high policy priority. "It's like the Chinese proverb. If one farmer dies, then 100 merchants will die" (*Bangkok Post* 1/30/2001). Rehabilitation of the farming sector is also in line with the more inward-oriented approach to economic development, because the sector has low import contents and is considered less vulnerable to external factors. For a similar reason, national populism gives more weight to

small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs), believing that the failure of some SMEs would cause less damage to the whole economy, unlike big-business failures.

Finally, Chuan's neoliberalism aspired to dismantle the pre-crisis developmental state model in which the state under the control of corrupt politicians played a key role in the economy together with some forty to fifty Chinese-Thai families that controlled nearly the whole modern economy ranging from banking through manufacturing to services (*Nation* 5/18/2000). In a similar way, the Chuan government preferred market-driven corporate and banking restructuring in which the government's direct intervention remained minimal. The government's primary role was defined as providing regulatory and other legal-institutional frameworks for the market. For instance, the government rejected any idea of creating a national or centralized asset management corporation that would nationalize non-performing loans (NPLs). It instead encouraged banks to take care of their bad assets by establishing their own private asset management companies, even though the NPLs of already closed banks and finance companies were inevitably transferred to a government-supported asset management company.

In contrast to Chuan's market-oriented policy regime, Thaksin's populism calls for a more active role of the state in helping the two economic sectors, agriculture and SMEs, which were given a low priority in the earlier discourses of globalization and neoliberalism. In detail, it has propounded, among others, three key state policies: a debt moratorium for farmers, village investment funds, and a centralized national asset management company. First, Thaksin and his party proposed a three-year moratorium on interest repayments on farmers' loans borrowed from the Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives (BAAC), which was in turn funded mostly by foreign loans. Second, village investment funds, with the support of a one-tambon-one-product campaign, were designed to create small- and medium-size local enterprises as well as help out rural areas. In detail, the TRT promised a one million baht loan to every village that could come up with a viable plan to use the funds. Priority would go to SME projects utilizing local raw materials and knowledge. Finally, a Thai Asset Management Company (TAMC) would be set up to buy bad loans from the banking system with a total face value of 1.3 trillion bath (*Nation* 6/22/2001). The previous private asset management company approach did not help to restructure the SMEs' bad loans, which accounted for 40 percent of the NPLs in the financial system that peaked at about 2.7 trillion baht, more than 45 percent of the total loans (*Bangkok Post* 9/1/1999).

In sum, the Chuan government's neoliberal development regime pursued an outward-oriented, foreign capital-funded, export-driven, and modern-sector-based growth regime, with the agricultural and public sectors playing marginal roles (Jarvis 2001). In contrast, Thaksin's populism holds a quite different idea about what course of post-crisis economic development to take, with a view to developing a more-balanced, inward-oriented and domestic demand-based economy.

#### 4. POLITICAL EXPLANATION FOR POPULISM

In this and next section we account for the sudden rise of populism in Thailand. The conventional wisdom is that populism is attributed to poverty, inequality and distributive conflict (Sachs 1989; Dornbusch and Edwards 1991b). Disagreeing with this conventional explanation for populism, a recent theory of liberal populism makes an attempt to separate the concept of populism from any specific model of economic development. According to

liberal populism, populism is not an antithesis to neoliberalism, as in this study, but may be “compatible with and complementary to neoliberal reforms in certain contexts” (Roberts 1995: 83). It is rather a mode of clientelistic political mobilization by personalist leaders when institutionalized forms of political representation break down amid social and economic upheavals. Thus, “it is the failure of representative institutions like political parties, labor unions, and autonomous social organizations to mediate between citizens and the state that paves the way for the direct, personalist mobilization of heterogeneous masses which is synonymous with populism” (Roberts 1995: 113).

The key hypothesis of liberal populism is that political deinstitutionalization, which is a consequence of neoliberal adjustments and economic crises, leads to populism. This political interpretation of populism is inapplicable to the case of Thailand. A major problem with it is that the country does not have any history of strong political institutions. Before the crisis, Thai political parties remained very volatile from election to election, and there was no coherent political cleavage or issue agenda over which political parties were divided over time (Samudvanija 1995: 347). Leftist political parties and politically powerful organized labor unions were virtually unseen in the country. Instead, clientelism was a dominant mode of interaction between political leaders and citizens before the crisis. In other words, like most other Asian democracies, political institutions were chronically weak in *pre-crisis* Thailand. This means that no meaningful process of political deinstitutionalization could follow the economic crisis and neoliberal adjustments in Thailand. Rather, it turned out that the crisis made social organizations such as the Assembly of the Poor and the P-Net, a private election watchdog, more vocal. For instance, the Assembly of the Poor openly launched a campaign to vote down the Democrat Party during the election campaign period, even though it did not endorse any particular party.

Earlier at the onset of the economic crisis, social organizations, with the support of the military, successfully drove hesitant old parliamentarians to ratify a reform constitution. The new constitution was designed with a specific view to establishing political stability and cleaning up patron-client networks that corrupt politicians had run (*Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand* 1997). Even though the new constitution by itself would be insufficient to get rid of the widespread practice of pork barreling, it definitely would have the effect of curbing down such practice. It stipulates that ministers shall not be concurrently senators or house representatives, and that they shall not hold a position in any sort of commercial enterprise or shall not be a shareholder of any business except to a certain legal limit. When House representatives defect or are dismissed from their parties, they no longer keep their House membership. To run for the House, prospective candidates should be members of a single political party for a consecutive period of no less than 90 days. These clauses, along with introduction of a single-member district system, are also expected to have the effect of reducing partisan fragmentation, and, consequently, strengthening Thailand’s notoriously weak political party system. This is especially true when the PR component has a 5 percent threshold.

To summarize, the economic crisis and the subsequent neoliberal adjustments did not weaken social organizations or civil society in Thailand. On the contrary, the civil society, i.e., dense network of social organizations, was rejuvenated in the course of weathering the crisis. A major political contribution by the economic crisis was institutionalization of the new rules of the game, which would have the ultimate effect of strengthening the previously fragile political party system. In other words, we do not observe political deinstitutionalization in post-crisis Thailand, but we rather notice that the traditional patron-

client networks have been weakened, even if not eliminated, in the wake of the economic crisis. *Notwithstanding* the strengthening of political institutions especially, the political party system, a populist government was put in place in Thailand, which contradicts the hypothesis of liberal populism.<sup>2</sup>

## 5. ECONOMIC EXPLANATION FOR POPULISM

The previous section has argued that to the contrary of liberal populism, political deinstitutionalization did not account for the sudden rise of populism in Thailand. This section will show that the conventional wisdom linking poverty to populism better explains the 2001 event in Thailand, but with a slight modification. In particular, it puts forward a hypothesis that absolute poverty indeed accounted for the outright victory of the TRT and its populist policy package. The analysis of poverty here will rely on sub-national (cross-regional) comparison within Thailand instead of cross-country analysis. The reason for employing the cross-regional approach is that we have comparable cross-regional data about absolute poverty within Thailand, while absolute poverty in terms of national poverty incidence is not strictly comparable across countries.

One might say that if we use relative poverty indicators such as Gini coefficient and income ratio, we can engage in cross-country comparison of poverty. This is true, but the analysis here does not employ this research strategy either. The reason for this is that there was no significant post-crisis change in income disparity in Thailand, even though there existed some meaningful decrease in relative poverty in Indonesia and a dramatic upsurge in income inequality in South Korea in the wake of the economic crisis (World Bank 2000: 115-6).<sup>3</sup> Hence, this study analyzes cross-regional variation in absolute poverty within post-crisis Thailand.

Meanwhile, to measure the extent of populist appeals at the regional level, this study uses a proxy variable, that is, the TRT's lead in PR votes over the DP. More precisely, this variable represents the TRT's vote percentage in a region's total valid PR votes deducted by the DP's share in the same region. This proxy variable is designed to serve four functions. First, by using PR or party-list voting outcomes, it will control for candidates' individual characteristics, varying from constituency to constituency. Second, it will also control, to some extent, for the quite contentious factor in the election, that is, corruption: despite a general contagion between PR and district voting in a mixed electoral system, it is certain that PR voting was less exposed to money politics such as direct vote buying and local godfathers' monetary or other influences in Thailand. This was exactly what the Thai constitutional designers had in mind when introducing the PR component in the new electoral system. Third, the proxy variable counts on seats but on votes for political parties. This is intended to control for the disturbing effect of electoral systems in converting votes into seats. Finally, to eliminate the influence or interference of other political parties, which

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<sup>2</sup> Even though the rules of the game in the constitution contributed to Thaksin's electoral victory, his political life was also once seriously threatened by the newly established National Counter Corruption Commission's charge that he made a false asset declaration.

<sup>3</sup> For more information about cross-country poverty levels, see Asian Development Bank (2000, 2001a, 2001b).

was of little relevance to the competition between populism and neoliberalism, the variable focuses exclusively on votes for the TRT and the DP.

With regard to absolute poverty in Thailand, of the 6.8 million Thais living under the national poverty line in 1996, "1.25 million were in the North, 3.97 million were in the Northeast, 0.66 million in the Central Plains, 0.9 million in the South, 0.02 million in Bangkok, and 0.02 million in surrounding areas" (*Bangkok Post* 4/21/1998). This means that the respective regional poverty rates in 1996 were as follows: 10.4 % in the North, 19 % in Northeast, 6.3 % in the Central Plains, 11.5 % in the South, 0.4 % in Bangkok, and 0.6 % in its vicinity.

After the economic crisis, 3.1 million new poor were created nationwide in 1999 (*Bangkok Post* 8/1/2000). The largest increases were in the Northeast and South, followed by the Central. The poverty rates rather dropped in the most urbanized areas, Bangkok and its vicinity. The North's poverty rate did not change much. In other words, the already poor areas except the North became poorer after the crisis (Table 2).<sup>4</sup>

**Table 2.** Poverty Indicators at the Regional Level in Thailand

	Gini		Poverty Incidence (%)	
	1996	2000	1996	1999
Greater Bangkok	0.38	0.36	0.6	0.2
Central	0.35	0.36	6.3	7.5
North	0.39	0.39	11.2 (10.4)	10.6
Northeast	0.39	0.40	19.4 (19.0)	30.8
South	0.37	0.38	11.5	15.7

Note: Greater Bangkok includes Bangkok's vicinity, and the figures in parentheses are my own calculations based on the above *Bangkok Post* report and the official population data.

Source: Natenuj (2001); the National Statistical Office, <http://www.nso.go.th>

Also note that, regardless of regions, rural areas experienced a sharp increase in the poverty incidence. "The crisis has contributed to a sharp increase in the incidence of poverty both in villages and sanitary districts [as opposed to municipal areas]. In villages [in particular], crisis has highly increased the poverty by 48.5 and 109.2 percent in 1998 and 1999. Poverty incidence in village areas stood as high as 21.5 percent of total population in rural areas" (Natenuj 2001: 13). This explains why the national urban center recorded the lowest poverty rate in the table. An explanation for this strange phenomenon considering the largely urban and financial nature of the Asian economic crisis is found in *the Nation* (1/4/2000).

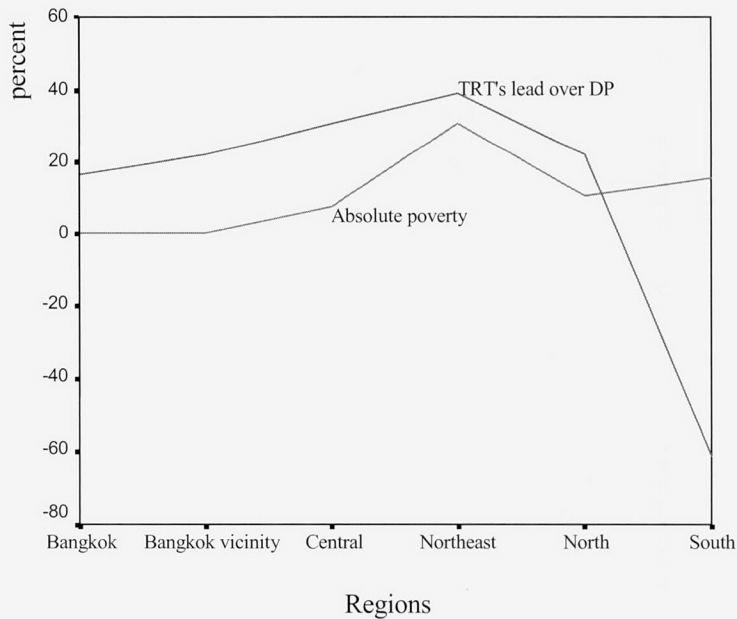
Before the crisis, farmers got their income in two roughly equal parts, one part from agriculture, the other from sending off their sons and daughters to work in the city. In the first year of the crisis, the second part disappeared. The sons and daughters lost their jobs and stopped sending money home. In the second year, the first part shrank because crop prices

<sup>4</sup> Economic inequality in terms of the Gini coefficient underwent little change or increased by a negligible margin in all areas except Greater Bangkok, where it rather decreased notably. Hence, it obviously cannot account for the victory of Thaksin's populism.

fell, and the sons and daughters came back home to share in the family rice bowl. Urban Thailand survived the social disruption of this crisis because two or three million people left. This transferred the impact away to the villages, where it is not so visible but just as hurtful.

Given Thailand's above-mentioned regional poverty situations, I find that poverty was indeed an important factor behind the so-called Thaksin fever in the 2001 parliamentary election. Aside from the South, which is the apparently perpetual stronghold of the DP, Figure 1 shows that regional absolute poverty was correlated closely to the above-mentioned proxy variable. The national urban center, Bangkok, which, as noted above, had the lowest poverty rate and did not experience a significant increase in the poverty after the crisis, was least affected by the Thaksin fever. On the other hand, the Northeast, which displayed the greatest poverty rate and at the same time experienced the greatest increase in the poverty after the crisis, showed the greatest lead of the TRT over the DP. It is worth noting that the North, Thaksin's home region, was not the place where the TRT entertained the greatest lead over the DP, despite the TRT campaign of "Prime Minister from the North." Even though the poverty rate in the North remained high compared to other regions, the crisis did not change its poverty incidence as much as in the South, Northeast or Central.

**Figure 1.** Absolute Poverty and Thai Rak Thai's Lead over the Democrat Party



Note: The election results were downloaded from the Department of Local Administration, <http://www.dola.go.th> after the second round of elections on January 29, 2001.

Interestingly enough, the South remained virtually immune to the Thaksin fever. First, the DP led over the TRT by a great margin in the region, while the opposite was the case



with the other regions. Second, the DP's performance in Songkhla, that is, the most turbulent area in the South over a Malaysia-Thailand gas pipeline project in the run-up to the election, was not really any different than in other southern provinces at all.<sup>5</sup> Finally, the TRT won only one out of the 54 southern district seats in the 2001 election, even though Thaksin's old party, Palang Dharma, used to win three out of the 45 contested seats in the region in the 1992 parliamentary election.

It is difficult to explain the exceptional preference for the DP in the South with just economic circumstances. The region had the second highest poverty rate next to the Northeast before the crisis, and it also experienced one of the largest increases in the poverty rate during the crisis. In other words, it was one of the regions in which the poverty situation deteriorated after the crisis. Regional income and debt levels also cannot properly account for the DP's exceptional performance in the South (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Average Monthly Income and Debt per Capita by Region in Thailand (baht)

	Income		Change (%)	Debt 2000
	1996	2000		
Nation	2,933	3,380	15.2	18,247
Greater Bangkok	6,896	7,716	11.9	34,503
Central	3,000	3,800	26.7	19,159
North	2,423	2,544	5.0	16,841
Northeast	1,581	2,014	27.4	13,135
South	2,533	3,002	18.5	15,330

Note: 2000 figures are preliminary.

Sources: <http://www.nso.go.th> and National Statistics Office (1999: 143)

Rather, an apparently unwavering regional attachment to the DP, which congealed over time except a few provinces of the Muslim-dominant Deep South, is more likely to explain the party's exceptional performance in the South. This requires further research for verification. Yet, if this is true, it has an important theoretical implication for populism: even if political variables fail to explain the *rise* of populism in Thailand, as discussed in the previous section, a solid political cleavage structure may explain the *absence* of populism. In other words, political parties founded on solid political cleavages can block a populist backlash in the first place.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

Of the three Asian economies that went under the IMF's stewardship during the regional economic crisis (namely, Thailand, Indonesia, and South Korea), only Thailand has experienced a strong populist backlash. This study has explored why the country turned its economic development course from neoliberalism to populism in early 2001. It has first found that the instance of Thaksin's populism does not support the idea of liberal populism, which is a recent political interpretation of populism in the Latin American literature. Unlike

<sup>5</sup> For conflicts over the project, see various issues of *Nation or Bangkok Post* in October 2000.

the conventional economic interpretation of populism, liberal populism attributes the rise of populism to political deinstitutionalization and personalization of authority. Thaksin's populism, however, arose in new political circumstances in which Thailand's rampant political patronage system was weakening, its notoriously fragile political party system was undergoing de-fragmentation, and its social organizations including non-government organizations were becoming more assertive.

Second, this study, drawing on a sub-national comparison, has shown that absolute poverty was responsible for the rise of Thaksin's populism. In more detail, by analyzing the post-crisis election results, it has found that the so-called Thaksin fever, measured with the TRT's electoral lead over the DP at the regional level, was correlated strongly to the post-crisis regional poverty level, except in the southern region. This finding turns out to be in favor of the conventional wisdom that often links populism to poverty and economic inequalities, even if this study has put greater emphasis on *absolute* poverty.

Finally, this study has tentatively conjectured that, even though political variables such as political deinstitutionalization do not explain the *establishment* of a populist government, they still may explain its *absence*. It has implied that political variables, especially, a solid political cleavage structure, can block the sudden rise of populism in democratic elections. In other words, even when there exist favorable economic conditions for the rise of populism, populism will not prevail in democratic elections if there are effective political barriers that block its advance at the beginning. This phenomenon is seen in the South of Thailand, the region carrying strong partisan attachments to the Democrat Party.

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