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**THAKSINOCRACY OR MANAGERIALIZATION?
REFORMING THE THAI BUREAUCRACY**

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THAKSINOCRACY OR MANAGERIALIZATION?
REFORMING THE THAI BUREAUCRACY[1]

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Thailand Premier's Thaksin Shinawatra's sweeping election victory in February 2005 offered his government an unprecedented second term with an overwhelming parliamentary majority. Already, in his first term, he had broken the mould of Thai political rule in a number of ways. The new departures that concern us most in this article are his administrative reforms. Thaksin's predisposition, from his background as CEO of a personal business empire, was (at least at a rhetorical level) to challenge Thailand's deep-seated bureaucratic traditions, with their formal, stately and convoluted patterns of decision making. He publicly decried Thailand's bureaucracy as old-fashioned and corrupt while extolling business virtues and an entrepreneurial style (*The Nation*, 12 February 2003; 2 July, 2003). His impatience with these processes in part underlay his stated enthusiasm for administrative reform, most dramatically expressed in the so-called 'big bang' bureaucratic restructuring passed into law in October 2002. But there were more significant underlying reasons for the bureaucratic upheavals the Thaksin government initiated in its first term. Above all, Thaksin sought to centralize effective, day to day power over strategic arms of the bureaucracy so as to harness its resources to the ends of his party and its supporters.

This administrative reform program bore the unmistakeable stamp of New Public Management (NPM).[2] Much of the language of the reform program was managerialist in tone and many of the measures adopted mimicked those that were first introduced elsewhere under the NPM label.[3] However, the main argument of this paper is that the reforms are best understood as a politicization program rather than as a managerial one. Issues underlying the standard NPM agenda – managerial devolution, service quality and efficiency, customer satisfaction and so on – were conspicuous by their absence from the reform program. Thaksin's first objective was to reshape the Thai bureaucratic culture so as to co-opt and finally subdue the power of Thai bureaucrats as a political class, in the process creating a more effective instrument of personal and partisan rule.[4]

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[2] For analysis of the content and significance of NPM see Hood (1991)

[3] 'Managerialism' can be defined as a belief in the generic character of management as an art and as a science, both in business and in government.

[4] The political control agenda is one that any government (whether led by Thaksin or by another party leader) would be likely to pursue, given the longer-term implications of the democratization process. As the title to this article suggests, the reform program is viewed here as one that is

The argument proceeds as follows. First, the most pressing issues on the administrative reform agenda are identified as a legacy of the so-called 'bureaucratic polity'. This legacy is being confronted by a government that is determined to push through its own program of economic, social and regime-preserving programs. In this initial discussion, an analysis of the Thaksin Government's style of rule and political program is necessary to comprehend the nature and scope of its demands for bureaucratic reform. Moving on, we present a framework for understanding contemporary Thai administrative reform as a political program concerned with seeking to take political control of resources formerly locked up in bureaucratic processes and structures. Managerial reform is being deployed in order to redistribute bureaucratic power to the political executive. We then turn to an analysis of the reform initiatives from this perspective, noting that the measures selected for implementation from the NPM menu are those which serve the over-riding purpose. The concluding discussion assesses the possibility that the politicization agenda may, in the longer run, also bring about improved bureaucratic performance as well as enhanced political control.

THE DECLINE OF THE BUREAUCRATIC POLITY

A standard interpretation of the role and status of the bureaucracy in Thailand has been to view it as a focal point of power and influence in the governing process. Riggs (1966: 312), in outlining his thesis that Thailand was best described as a 'bureaucratic polity', quoted a contemporary scholar, David Wilson (1962): '…politics has become a matter of competition between bureaucratic cliques for the benefits of government'. At the same time, the Thai bureaucracy was characterized as being seriously deficient in many aspects of administrative and policy capacity. Its main strengths, according to the conventional view, lay not in rational direction or control of state policy and administration but in maintaining its position in the power system. To this end, it developed the capacity both to extract resources from the populace while maintaining social order and also to organize autonomously its own internal affairs so as to satisfy its dominant purpose – the attainment of wealth and status for its members.

The concept of the bureaucratic polity referred both to a particular type of political regime and also to the influence of Thai bureaucratic culture on the mode of governance. Military rulers frequently ousted elected governments in Thailand and substituted their own form of rule, co-opting civilian elements as they saw fit. The power of bureaucrats stemmed in large part from the reliance of the military on the bureaucratic elite in order to rule effectively. During the 1970s and 1980s, parliamentarians claimed a greater share in the spoils of office but throughout, the great majority of cabinet members in successive ministries were drawn from the bureaucracy. Thus, the bureaucratic polity was one in which bureaucrats were permanent members of the political class. As to

heavily influenced by Thaksin's own style and aspirations, but this is not to deny that in the process it may achieve reforms that (other things being equal) would result in systems of bureaucratic control and accountability consistent with liberal democratic forms of government.

the mode of governance characteristic of the bureaucratic polity, an important dimension was shaped as much by the bureaucracy's efforts to preserve a particular set of social, economic and political privileges as by its efforts to function as an instrument of rational policy and administration. Chai-anan (1987) provides a typical analysis of Thai bureaucratic culture: the bureaucracy was hierarchically organized in order to reflect differential status and power considerations rather than a rational division of labour or chain of command; it gave priority to personal relations of patronage and dependency, with deference and loyalty being more important than merit; and it emphasized above all else security for its members. Thai bureaucracy was typified by corruption, factionalism, departmentalism and a tendency to diffuse responsibility for making decisions so as to preserve the status and autonomy of individuals, cliques and departments (Siffin 1966: 200-1). Purchase of office was common in the senior ranks (Ockey 2004: 148-9).

In sum, functional rationality was not the main organizing principle of Thai bureaucratic norms and practices. Nevertheless, there were some parts of the state machinery that developed a reputation for technocratic excellence, such as the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB), the Bureau of the Budget (BOB), Office of the Civil Service Commission (OSCS) and The Bank of Thailand (BOT). But even these islands of apparent technocratic or reforming zeal were something of a mirage. The Nukul Commission, which reported on the reasons for the failings of the BOT during the 1997 financial crisis, identified a number of organizational defects that challenged the belief that these elite, technocratic agencies were any different from the rest of the bureaucracy: in the BOT there was in-fighting between departments; seniority, favouritism and loyalty had supplanted merit in the rise to the top; and leaders 'lacked vision and didn't have the courage to make decisions …'. A culture of consensus had evolved and, along with it, a lack of intellectual challenge or debate on key policy issues. Additionally, political interference in the Bank had grown '… because top officials wanted to please politicians in order to keep their positions secure' (Nukul Commission 1998: 169-72).

This last observation on political influence reflected an important change in the character of the bureaucratic polity by the 1990s. Indeed, the use of the term had become out-dated as electoral and party politics slowly brought to the fore societal (especially business) interests discontented with being subordinated to the bureaucracy and the military (Ockey 2004: 143-5). Civil unrest and student protests against military rule also played their part in undermining the military-bureaucratic hegemony. The Thai polity in the 1990s was a parliamentary-style democracy managed by an alliance of convenience between the bureaucracy and an ascendant political class of elected parliamentarians and political bosses. Military and other security forces retained their economic privileges and were closely interconnected with bureaucratic and political elites through shared business interests and through influence networks, but the pattern of frequent coups seemed to have been broken. Members of the rising class of professional politicians, loosely affiliated in political parties based on regional or local alliances of businessmen and notables, formed unstable parliamentary

coalitions in order to distribute the spoils of office. 'Money politics' dominated the electoral and parliamentary processes. However, the bureaucracy retained a considerable degree of control over policy as well as administration, because coalition governments were generally weak and indecisive (Bidhya 2001b). These policy weaknesses were starkly revealed by the financial crisis in 1997, when the government was caught by surprise and proved incapable of responding effectively (MacIntyre 2003: 58-69).

Cross-currents of reform and reaction in Thai politics and society in the 1990s included first, a political-cum-constitutional reform agenda strongly supported by the middle class and second, a structural adjustment agenda of downsizing and de-bureaucratization, the latter in response to the 1997 financial crisis. The former gave rise to a new constitution adopted in 1997, which aimed at curbing corruption in the political class through setting up a series of independent, quasi-judicial watchdogs; strengthening the elected executive government; asserting civil rights; enabling popular participation; and bringing about administrative decentralization and stronger local self-government. However, the bedding-in of the new constitution was overtaken by a political transformation of another kind – the election of Thaksin as prime minister in 2001. The implementation of the IMF-sponsored structural adjustment agenda prompted a political reaction against the ruling coalition that tapped sentiments of Thai nationalism, contributing significantly to the victory of the *Thai Rak Thai* (TRT) Party in 2001.[5] TRT won a near-majority of seats and, through alliances with or absorption of other parliamentary political groups, survived the full four-year term – an unprecedented feat. The growing dominance of a unified political executive in this new political order was reaffirmed at the 2005 election, when TRT won approximately two-thirds of the popular vote and an increased parliamentary majority. This allowed it not only to govern without a coalition partner but also to forestall any parliamentary censure vote.

THE THAKSIN MODEL OF EXECUTIVE GOVERNMENT

Coalition cabinets were the norm in Thailand, with Parliament being the arena for inter- and intra-party logrolling and deal-making. However, due to TRT's numerical dominance in the lower house of parliament coupled with its discipline as a group, the legislature was largely subdued. While TRT was a complex structure of factions and groups, it was welded together by the attractions of the party's financial resources, reinforced by Thaksin's firm grip on

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[5] Thaksin had begun his political career with a somewhat inglorious and brief period in coalition government in the mid-1990s, when he had served as a deputy prime minister. Following this experience, he set up *Thai Rak Thai* in 1998 with the help of his large personal fortune – accumulated through successful ventures in the Thai telecommunications industry, thanks to government concessions. TRT's successful campaign in 2001 combined a number of elements: an effective nation-wide grass-roots party organisation; alliances where necessary with local and provincial political bosses; a nation-wide election campaign backed by widespread polling; a platform of rural populism; and the use of nationalist sentiments to tap into disenchantment with the austerity measures. Rural self-sufficiency, domestic 'pump-priming' of the economy and incentives for local entrepreneurship were offered as an alternative strategy for economic recovery.

the spoils of office. [6] Excluded or dissenting interests and groups were increasingly compelled to seek access to the political process almost exclusively within the framework of the ruling coalition and its networks of influence.

Not only was the political executive dominant over parliamentary factions, executive power was increasingly concentrated in the hands of Thaksin as prime minister.[7] He made liberal use of his power of ministerial appointment and dismissal, imposing eight cabinet reshuffles totalling 55 individual new appointments in three years (*The Nation*, 12 March, 2004).The 1997 constitution increased the potential power of the office in a number of ways. For example ministers, upon being appointed by the prime minister, were forbidden from serving as members of parliament, a measure aimed at raising the costs of defection (as sacking or resignation meant loss of political office altogether). The intention was to strike a blow against money politics and coalition instability, but the corollary effect was to increase the prime minister's disciplinary power. Another change also aimed at curbing the power of potential defectors and opposition forces in parliament was to increase the number of signatures needed for a no-confidence motion to forty percent of members, a figure beyond the reach of the opposition in the 2001 parliament following the formation of the ruling coalition. A third change was a rule that a candidate had to be a member of a party for at least 90 days before contesting a seat under its label, whereas the prime minister was required to give only 45 days notice of an election. This also raised the costs of defection and indiscipline (Pasuk and Baker 2004: 95).

Traditionally, Thai coalition cabinets have been a somewhat loose connection of ministerial-cum-bureaucratic fiefdoms, with the spoils of office, including departmental patronage, dominating each minister's political agenda rather than any collective policy goals of the government (RIAP 2001). Although cabinet met regularly, it had long agendas which mostly comprised matters of legal formality passed up by department heads for the stamp of approval. The convention was that ministers exercised considerable executive autonomy within their portfolio area, and practiced mutual non-interference. This included 'junior' or deputy ministers, each of whom was assigned a functional area bringing together a collection of several departments within the portfolio. The coordinating capacity of the minister was not always strong, because most of the resources of personnel and money traditionally lay with the departments,

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[6] TRT included a large number of local political bosses and defectors from other parties. For example, Thaksin in 2000 admitted as a member Snoh Thienthong, a provincial political boss who had been critical in making and breaking governments in the mid-1990s. Snoh played a key role in deal-making prior to the 2001 elections, when about 100 sitting members defected to the join TRT (Pasuk and Baker 2004: 83). As the 2005 election approached, TRT again began to 'suck in' sitting members of the opposition, by one count attracting up to thirty defectors in the months leading up August 2004 (*Bangkok Post*, 9 August, 2004).

[7] The 'Thaksin style' of politics includes his populism, his authoritarian leanings (for example, heavy-handed bullying and censorship of the media) and his undisguised hostility towards independent watchdogs such as the NCCC and the Election Commission, set up to check executive power and political conduct (Pasuk and Baker 2004). The focus here is on Thaksin's strategy of concentration of executive power within the system of executive government itself.

not at the portfolio level.[8] Ministers' capacity to control the resources of their departments depended greatly on forging personal ties with top officials, making battles over appointments and transfers one of their main preoccupations.

The Thaksin government was as much constrained by and implicated in these standard forms of bureaucratic politicking as was its predecessors. Indeed, Thaksin through his business career was accustomed to the 'rules of the game' and was a direct beneficiary via the various concessions he had won in building his business empire (Pasuk and Baker 2004: 41-59). Through family and other ties, Thaksin was well-connected with bureaucratic power brokers. However, while Thaksin understood the rules and was a successful player, they imposed severe constraints on the collective power of the political executive through dispersing patronage across numerous political and bureaucratic actors and networks. Much more effective would be a more centralized, politically managed system of spoils distribution which would respond more quickly and strategically to the ruling party's political needs. For these reasons, Thaksin's long-term aim appeared to be to break down existing forms of bureaucratic power, rather than merely to manage them.

Thaksin deployed and extended the powers of his office. As well as frequent ministerial re-shuffles, a number of steps were taken to concentrate power in his hands under the banner of 'CEO government' or, as Bidhya (2004) labels it: 'a country is my company' approach. This was achieved in a number of ways (some of which have been described already): he expanded the number of political appointments to positions in the Prime Minister's Office, including teams of policy advisors and TRT stalwarts (Pasuk and Baker 2004: 186); consistent with a CEO 'hands-on' style, he intervened more directly than was customary (both behind the scenes and often in public) when matters in individual portfolios or departments came unfavourably to his attention; he exercised close control over key appointments within the police, military and civil service, often for the sake of promoting associates and relatives but more generally in order to reward TRT sympathisers and to punish critics;[9] and finally, he combined these day-to-day actions with a program of budgetary and administrative reforms that aimed to enhance political control and disrupt existing centres of bureaucratic power. These reforms are considered in more detail in a later section.

POLITICIANS, BUREAUCRATS AND ADMINISTRATIVE REFORM IN PRE-THAKSIN THAILAND

The preceding discussion has established that a key issue confronting the Thaksin Government was to assert political control over a bureaucracy that was

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[8] Budgetary reform under Thaksin is discussed below. Among the measures are changes that seek to diminish the budgetary power of department heads.

[9] The direct involvement by Thaksin (and by other senior ministers) in removing and replacing senior officials in the first year of the new government's term, and the numbers of officials involved, represented a significant step towards a more politicized system of senior appointments in the civil service (see, for example, *The Nation* February 10 & 12 2003).

accustomed to controlling its own resources and to participating directly in the daily work of the political executive. From the outset, at the heart of the administrative reform process and at the core of the reform agenda was the very issue of bureaucratic power in its traditional forms. The relative power of the bureaucracy and the political executive has often been singled out in discussions of administrative reform (Carino 1991; Moon and Ingraham 1998). 'Reform capacity' (that is the transformative impact of administrative reform as distinct from its more self-serving, incremental preoccupations) rests principally on the institutional context within which politicians and bureaucrats interact (Knill 1999; Painter 2004). Knill (1999) argues that continental European, 'statist' public law regimes have 'autonomous bureaucracies' that by and large follow incremental, bureaucratic reform paradigms. The most notable cases of comprehensive, politically inspired administrative reform in the late twentieth century tended to come from regimes where bureaucracies were of a more 'instrumental' kind that is, situated in regimes where the political executive was clearly dominant.[10] Painter (2004) extends this analysis to take in a number of Asian bureaucracies, showing how autonomous bureaucracies in these cases also tend to follow either a pattern of minimal, incremental reform or (where external demands from business or civil society are strong) reluctantly negotiate a reform program within bureaucratically-defined parameters. While Thailand was identified as an autonomous bureaucracy, it was also suggested that the election of the Thaksin government presaged a regime change that would shift the reform paradigm towards a more politicized, comprehensive program of mandated reform (Painter 2004: 376-81).

In order to develop this point further here, it is necessary to contrast pre- and post- Thaksin reforms. In pre-Thaksin Thailand, there was a series of bureaucratic reform programs under which a relatively small group of technocratic reformers in central agencies such as the OCSC, BOB, Office of the Auditor General and Comptroller General's Department sought to impose a modernization strategy of management and financial reforms on a powerful and reluctant bureaucratic establishment (RIAP 2001; Painter 2004). Such plans and strategies were a feature of successive Thai governments throughout the 1990s (Bidhya 2000). They were overseen by a series of reform commissions comprising a mixture of ministers, senior officials and outside experts. The bureaucratic reformers sought to enlist politicians to their cause and after the 1997 financial crisis they received strong support from the World Bank and other donors. A familiar mix of NPM and structural adjustment downsizing measures was recommended. The result was a 1999 *Public Sector Management Reform Plan*, which supplanted an earlier (but very similar) 1997 *Public Sector Reform Master Plan*. The program had five main priority areas: revision of roles, functions and management practices of government departments; budget, finance and procurement management reform; personnel management reform; legal reform; and reform of cultural and public values (ethics and anti-corruption).

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[10] Examples include UK civil service under the Thatcher government, the New Zealand state sector in the late 1980s and the Singapore bureaucracy under Lee Kwan Yew.

Bidhya (2004) characterizes the reform atmosphere and style under these successive programs and plans as 'NPM fever', in the grip of which the superficial transplantation of NPM ideas and instruments produced ineffective and counter-productive 'hybrids', without addressing many of the fundamental problems. Indeed, the common result was for the hybrids to be adapted to accommodate the dysfunctions, rather than to remedy them. Because reform required 'cultural change', pilots were launched in order to demonstrate that the reforms would work, usually in those agencies that were already among the more modernized (Bidhya 2004: 248). Much time and effort was spent in perfecting them to the satisfaction of the converted. Another example of an 'out-flanking' strategy was to set up alongside the existing senior staff hierarchy a 'senior executive service' (SES) for those staff willing to be subject to a more stringent performance regime, with the prospect that this group would eventually provide the pool of talent for all high-level appointments. But in the meantime, the rest of the bureaucracy carried on as before. Some departmental heads sought to capture the resources tied up in reform and reorganisation measures, seizing the opportunity to bid for increased numbers of senior positions in order to enhance their powers of patronage (Bidhya 2001b). Many line agencies resisted by inertia and were protected by the legal and bureaucratic complexities of implementing change.

In sum, a weak political executive was co-opted by a small group of technocrats in the central agencies, operating under the influence of global models of public sector reform, in order to pursue a managerially-inspired reform program aimed at performance improvement. However, this program ran into stiff bureaucratic opposition from the line departments. The small changes that did occur were either in a very small number of agencies, or produced quite contradictory results as the change process was captured by bureaucratic interests. The result was in large measure incremental, adaptive and self-serving. Under Thaksin, this was set to change as the reform agenda expanded to one that entailed changing the underlying regime basis of traditional bureaucratic power.

ADMINISTRATIVE REFORM THAKSIN-STYLE

On the face of it the administrative reform efforts of the Thaksin government show a considerable degree of continuity with those begun in the late 1990s, as if the process were simply 'business as usual'. Some of the reform initiatives that had been developed and piloted, or were on the drawing board but not implemented, were also pursued under the Thaksin government. Closer inspection, however, reveals that while the over-arching plans and blueprints talked the same NPM language and emphasized common themes, the parts that were speedily implemented are most recognizable as a clear mirror image of the Thaksin model of executive government. They are concerned with politicization of the bureaucracy through the vehicle of its managerial transformation.[11]

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[11] 'Politicization' is often used to mean the replacement of merit-based considerations in civil service appointments by partisan, political ones. Here, the term is used to describe a shift in relative power within the executive towards the political arm (Prime Minster and cabinet) away

In 2002 a *Royal Decree on Good Governance* was promulgated and in March 2003 the Thaksin government's administrative reform program was formally announced as the *Strategic Plan for Thai Public Sector Development*. The program was put under the charge of a new Public Sector Development Commission, with the support of an Office (OPDC). The Strategic Plan is in fact quite similar to the 1999 Program, focusing on streamlining and rationalization; restructuring and reorganization; budgetary and financial reform; HRM and compensation reform; 'work culture and values'; modernization through e-government; and encouragement of public participation. The *Decree on Good Governance* sets out four underlying principles: accountability, public participation, information disclosure and performance monitoring and evaluation. Specific directions for improvement include 'results-oriented administration'; 'effective public administration' (performance management and accrual accounting); 'delayering' of the work process to empower employees and improve the government-citizen interface; abolition of unnecessary agencies and functions; administrative decentralization; and a customer orientation by all government agencies.

This is a very comprehensive and ambitious agenda and, not surprisingly, implementation resources have been selectively applied to areas given the highest priority. Indeed, the *Plan* and *Decree* should be read principally as ideological documents, re-affirming a set of issues and principles that echo both contemporary global public management doctrine and also wider accountability principles trumpeted in the 1997 Constitution. The Thaksin Government has shown in a variety of ways that this accountability agenda is distant from its core values and operating principles – for example in Thaksin's attacks on the freedom of the press, hostile comments against the independent political watchdogs and a general lack of respect for advancing human rights – and hence, not surprisingly, little concrete has been seen in the way of measures concerned with public participation, empowering employees or improving the citizen-government interface. Instead, the emphasis has been on internal reforms that directly undermine traditional bureaucratic power centres: budget reform; the 'CEO Governor' measures; bureaucratic restructuring; and a linked set of personnel and performance management reforms applying principally to the senior ranks of the civil service. These four areas are considered in turn.

i) Budget Reform

Budget reform was an area of intense activity by World Bank and other aid agency consultants and advisers when they appeared on the scene after the financial crisis. Traditional budgeting practice in Thailand was based on bottom-up bidding and bargaining for funds between department heads and the BOB. Bids used as their starting point existing costs and establishments and invariably reflected ambitions to create more positions and increase the number of senior staff. In the process, in the eyes of the reformers, sound budgetary

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from the administrative arm (the bureaucracy). This may or may not involve politicization in the sense first mentioned.

practices – aggregate fiscal discipline, allocative efficiency and tight fiscal control – were subordinated to the vagaries of bureaucratic politics.

A blueprint for reform, labelled the 'seven hurdles approach' and expressing contemporary expenditure management 'best practice' was drawn up by consultants (World Bank 2002). It set out a proposal for an output-based performance budgeting system (that is, one where the focus of bids and allocations would be program outputs not inputs) and a staged process to achieve it. Agencies had to cross seven hurdles to prepare themselves in improving their practices and systems in budget planning, output costing, procurement management, budget and funds control, financial and performance reporting, asset management and internal audit. The new system involved considerable devolution of financial management, but agencies would only qualify by achieving the 'hurdle standards'. Six pioneer agencies were singled out to blaze the path. By 2002 no agency had met the standards. Cautious steps such as block grants rather than line-item allocations ran into trouble because agency accounting systems were not able to meet required financial accountability standards. While outside consultants were engaged in developing blueprints for accrual accounting, or advising on performance indicators and output formats in preparation for crossing all the hurdles, agencies stumbled at the first ones. The advisers finally concluded that the 'hurdles' approach was too ambitious. It was impracticable to try to build elaborate, advanced systems (such as accrual accounting) that even countries fully converted to NPM were struggling with, before more basic financial management tools were in place (World Bank 2002).

Meanwhile, the Thaksin government wanted a budgeting system that would deliver it the capacity to shift resources quickly to identified political priorities. The advantages for this purpose of output budgeting were well recognized, and the government instructed that the 2003 budget be presented in this mode.[12] More significantly, Thaksin picked up an idea put forward by the budget reformers and set up a Budget Commission, chaired by himself and consisting of a deputy prime minister, finance minister, the prime minister's office minister (who is in charge of BOB), four other ministers appointed by cabinet, two hand-picked experts and the director of BOB (*The Nation*, 15 October 2001). A new budget law was drafted and, pending its passage, many of the measures were implemented by prime ministerial order. Effectively, the new commission took over from the BOB the tasks of determining budget allocations and finalizing and submitting the budget bills before they were submitted to cabinet. In preparing the 2004 budget, the commission also approved a 'medium-term' three-year budget forecast.

The draft budget law also contained other proposed reforms aimed at locking in departmental expenditure to the government's strategies. The budget

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[12] Output budgeting allows a government to insert its priorities directly into the allocation process from the outset, following which the bureaucracy adjusts staff numbers and organizational resources, rather than the existing cost of the latter being the starting point for allocations.

commission would sign a public service agreement (PSA) with each minister on fiscal and service delivery targets in line with 'government strategy targets'. Service delivery agreements (SDAs) would then be signed with heads of department for the delivery of the requisite outputs. The performance of portfolio ministers would be measured against the PSAs, while departmental heads were to be held to account for the SDAs. These new budget accountability systems bore the clear stamp of NPM budget reforms, which characteristically include a set of measures to enhance 'aggregate fiscal discipline' and 'strategic steering' (both requiring strong, collective political direction and systems to measure results against objectives).[13]

However, there was clearly some scepticism among Thaksin's ministers and advisers as to the practicality of some of the measures, in particular the practicality of implementing a more transparent performance monitoring system that would be used to reward and punish department heads (*The Nation*, 17 February, 2003). World Bank officials reviewing progress also noted that the performance evaluation system remained largely inoperative for lack of reliable performance information on service delivery outputs and outcomes (World Bank 2003: 6). Selective implementation of the reforms thus aimed first and foremost at top-down politicization of the budgetary process. This entailed a challenge to the traditional domination of planning, budgeting and performance monitoring processes by technocrats and bureaucrats. The BOB was not the only established agency to be put in its place. The National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB) within the Prime Minister's Office had the responsibility of writing and monitoring five-year national plans. In theory, the five-year plan fed directly into the budget process as a framework document. Thaksin made it clear that TRT's platform and re-election strategy, not the NESDB plan, would provide the planning framework, in the guise of a so-called four-year 'National Strategic Plan'. NESDB was side-lined and in 2004 Thaksin symbolically affirmed the new order by appointing a hand-picked outsider to be its head (*The Nation*, 2 October 2004). In late 2004, a plan was announced by the head of the OPDC to strengthen the office of the prime minister so as to make it 'the coordinating centre for bureaucratic management', acting as a 'performance body to assess the performance of each state agency… and report direct to the Prime Minister' (*The Bangkok Post*, 3 September 2004).

Politicization of the budget process went further. The total budget was notionally divided into three parts: functional (the funding of departments, especially their operating expenses); area-based (allocation of funds to provinces); and 'agenda-based' (allocation directly by the Prime Minister to matters of high political priority). One element in this third area was a pot of money labelled the 'central fund' allocated solely at the PM's discretion (although requiring cabinet endorsement).[14] Thaksin handed out in excess of 200 billion baht from this fund

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[13] While Thaksin's budgetary reforms followed the orthodoxy, his fiscal policies did not. He engaged in Keynesian deficit budgeting and liberally deployed 'development funds' for pork-barrelling (see below).
[14] This one-line allocation for 2005 amounted to 200 billion baht out of a total of 12 trillion baht (*Bangkok Post*, 22 September, 2004)

and from other sources in the course of a series of tours of the provinces between April and September 2004 (KPI 2004a). Thaksin claimed that by his tours he was 'doing away with red tape' and 'doing his homework', while the deputy finance minister dutifully insisted that all the funds allocated in this way were designed 'to promote the country's competitive potential' (*Bangkok Post*, 2 September 2004). Thus, although the budget reforms were built on a well-developed reform blueprint and entailed implementing a sophisticated set of new financial management systems, in the short term they provided Thaksin with additional levers to assert political control, both strategically and at a micro level.

ii) CEO-governors: Decentralization?

The use of NPM rhetoric and instruments to serve the politicization agenda is also evident in the appointment of 'CEO-governors'. Thailand's central government departments operated in the provinces through field offices headed by senior officials, who reported back to their own head offices. The interior ministry appointed provincial governors who in large part performed representative and ceremonial functions. However, they also supervised local government and provided a window for the ministry on general conditions in the provinces. The idea of a 'CEO-governor' was first raised at a government workshop in August 2001 (*Bangkok Post*, 6 August 2001). Thaksin later outlined his own ideas on the role, saying that the CEO should assume the role of 'prime minister's assistant' in each province, and would acquire the power to 'punish or promote officials under their jurisdiction' (*Bangkok Post*, 25 September 2001). This cross-departmental, integrative role was new. CEO-governors would take on the task of planning and coordinating provincial development and would be held accountable for overall provincial affairs – symbolically, the transition was 'from being a ruler to an executive' (*The Nation*, 12 January 2004). The scheme was piloted in four provinces in October 2001 and introduced in all provinces in October 2003. The new CEO-governors appointed in 2003 were gathered together with other top officials at a special two-week long induction course addressed by internationally renowned management gurus, as well as by Thaksin himself and by deputy PM Somkid (a former business management academic) (*The Nation*, 2 July 2003).

Decentralization to local government was an important component of the 1997 constitutional design, although was implemented with much foot-dragging. Thaksin showed no enthusiasm at all for it (World Bank 2003; Mutebi 2004). To the contrary, Thaksin's CEO-governor scheme epitomised the key theme of Thaksin's administrative reform strategy, namely the transformation of the operating style of the traditional bureaucracy into a more results-oriented instrument that would be responsive to central government policy and to political direction through 'hands-on' control. Additionally, the CEO-governor scheme was closely integrated with the budgetary reforms (and with other structural reforms) as part of the wider strategy of wresting control from traditional bureaucratic hierarchies. The new governors would take control of 'provincial budgets' which would be viewed from the centre as one-line

allocations. To assist in this, the finance ministry appointed chief financial officers in each province, reporting directly to each governor (*The Nation*, 26 September 2003). CEO-governors would no longer simply pass funds on to local bodies, but would direct their use to achieve provincial expenditure plans, which they were required to submit as part of the budget process (*The Nation*, July 21, 2004). In cabinet, each of the five deputy-prime ministers was given charge of a 'zone' of provinces, supervising and coordinating the government's policies in the zone (*The Nation*, 13 October 2002).[15] In the budget process, the same performance agreements as applied to directors-general of departments (with respect to functional allocations) were drawn up with CEO-governors for their provincial budget targets and outcomes.

The governors appointed in 2003 were drawn from within the ranks of the ministry. As interior minister Wan Noor put it, they were 'selected for their performance and track record, including their contribution to the government's war on drugs and its fight against 'dark influences'' (*The Nation*, 3 November 2003).[16] A flavour of their expected role was revealed by a comment by deputy-prime minister Somkid, who explained that as well as drawing up provincial plans, 'governors with good ideas receive additional budget, controlled by the Prime Minister' (KPI 2004b).

iii) Restructuring

The most dramatic and politically controversial of the Thaksin Government's administrative reform measures was the October 2002 restructuring through two Acts of Parliament of departments and ministries, popularly labelled the 'big bang'. It was hailed as a historic breakthrough because it was the first major reorganization of ministries since King Chulalongkorn set up Thailand's modern system of departmental government in 1897. Such a restructuring had been studied and discussed on and off for years within the various bureaucratic reform bodies, with a view to establishing a clear hierarchy of coordination and control and a more logical grouping of functions and activities.[17] Before the restructure there were 14 ministries and 126 departments; after the event there were 20 ministries and 143 departments.[18] The schemes of reorganization

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[15] It remains to be seen how far deputy prime ministers will actually exercise this supervision and achieve integration. Deputy PMs are also given supervision of a cluster of ministries, but their formal relationship with the portfolio ministers is ambiguous. Thaksin said that his idea was to delegate more work to his deputies so that he could become 'more like a coach' and 'steer the country in the right direction' (*Bangkok Post*, 6 October 2002).

[16] The 'war on drugs' and 'dark influences' was a 'gloves-off' military-style campaign against 'drug lords' across Thailand, initiated by Thaksin. Between 1 February and 26 November 2003 the Government claimed 91,454 arrests. The Thailand Research Development Institute estimated there had been 2,500 'silence killings', of which 500 resulted in arrests.

[17] On a visit to the Office of the Civil Service Commission in 2001 the author met with officials in a meeting room, the walls of which were papered with elaborate wall charts showing different overseas models of ministerial structures and functions.

[18] An earlier proposal that would have resulted in a more radical restructuring of departments within ministries was dropped in the face of resistance within cabinet and in parliament. The new ministries were Social and Human Security Development; Tourism and Sports; Natural Resources and Environment; Information and Communication Technology; and Culture.

received lengthy and detailed scrutiny in parliamentary committees, where complaints and fears were voiced from many quarters and fine adjustments were made as turf wars over distributing some of the spoils surfaced. It took many months for some officials to clarify exactly where they were working, and it took eight months before disputes over ownership of the assets of the former agriculture ministry were resolved (*Bangkok Post*, 23 June 2003).

It was not lost on commentators that the result of the so-called 'streamlining' was an increase in the number of agencies and top positions. A significant feature of the legislation was that it resulted in a 'spill' of all top jobs in order to assign officials to the newly created positions. [19] At the same time, the Government and OCSC announced that it would not be hiring new staff but would rely on existing establishment to fill the new senior vacancies. The amount of lateral movement and re-shuffling within the senior levels of the bureaucracy that resulted from this was unprecedented. This 'churning' of top positions and the reallocation of portfolios and functions was significant less for any managerial reason than for its political implications for client groups and for the bureaucrats themselves. The resulting disruption to established networks and ties violated basic norms of Thai bureaucratic life, but served well the political ends of the Government. While Thaksin's strategy was to transform the bases of bureaucratic power in the long run, in the short run he understood the importance of the exercise of the power of patronage to take charge of the bureaucratic machinery. The reorganization provided the opportunity to exercise this kind of hands-on control by ministers through the appointments and transfer process. It afforded the chance to reward officials who fitted the new mould by opening up new opportunities for them to be transferred and promoted. More generally the reorganization underlined the message that a bureaucrat's life under Thaksin was not a protected, sheltered existence but one that was subject to political and other uncertainties.

The process of creating and reorganizing departments also destabilised traditional centres of bureaucratic power, where legal authority for administrative and financial responsibilities had traditionally resided. Changes to budget procedures, described here above, had already begun this process. Additional legislation was also drafted to clarify the power of ministries as legal entities and to permit changes to departments to be effected by executive decree, with a view to shifting powers up the line to ministries and ministers (*Bangkok Post*, 3 September 2004). [20] In sum, while the official rhetoric accompanying the changes stressed performance, results and streamlining, the wider message was a political one about where power over the bureaucracy would in future lie.

The perceived rigidities and inertia embedded in the traditional departmental system were being undermined by other means as well. A clause in the new

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[19] Both Thaksin and OPDC had expressed the wish to increase the number of outside appointments to top positions, but the new positions were filled by internal re-shuffling.
[20] Changes to the legal standing of departments had been an integral part of earlier drafts of the October 2002 Acts.

Public Administration Act of October 2002 allowed ministries to form 'clusters' of departments with related functions. Clusters are headed by a deputy-permanent secretary, who can be delegated the permanent secretary's executive powers with respect to the cluster departments. Common service functions can be pooled in one of the cluster departments, staff re-assigned and budgets combined. The long-term goal was to see a new level of integration of related activities in both the management and budgeting processes. However, in the short term the plan ran into trouble. The position of deputy-permanent secretary was traditionally of lower status than many director-general (departmental head) positions. Deputy-permanent secretaries tended to be either relatively young, ambitious officials looking for a stepping-stone, or officials close to retirement for whom this was a final reward for faithful service (having failed to win the top job). The legal authority in the position did not, in any case, provide the means to insist on coordination or resource-pooling against the objections of a director-general (Scott 2002: 6-7). To resolve this problem, some positions were upgraded and regulations were written to provide the office with more budgetary and personnel management authority in relations with director-generals (*The Nation*, 5 August 2003). A deliberate strategy was adopted of seeking out 'high-flyers' to fill the new vacancies.

In addition to the re-design of the central coordinating machinery of ministries – especially in the new ministries, where there was a considerable degree of shuffling and re-assignment under way – OPDC's plans included proposals for creation of a large number of 'service delivery units' within departments (including at the provincial level) each with devolved administrative powers, clear performance targets and subject to service agreements.[21] This proposal, echoing various NPM-modelled devolved management strategies, was on top of a pre-existing set of arrangements possible under the 1999 Public Organization Act. Bidhya (2001a) has documented the hybrid nature of the provisions in this Act, which was based more on a French model of *establissement public* than on the UK model of autonomous 'business units'. Only a handful of relatively insignificant bodies were 'autonomized' under this provision, each run by a politically appointed board but subject to strong bureaucratic oversight (contrary to the autonomization model). OPDC had in mind an arrangement more in conformity with the NPM model of arms-length, performance-based management within the ministry hierarchy. However, while the restructuring measures described here above were implemented in Thaksin's first term, this proposal remained on the drawing board.

iv) Personnel Policy and Performance Management

The reformers in OCSC and OPDC put a high priority on personnel management reform, not only to instil a performance culture but also to combat corruption. A survey conducted in 1999 for the OCSC found that 40 percent of senior officials reported that senior positions were purchased. The most common methods used involved giving money and gifts over a long period of

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[21] Interview, 3 March 2004

time; providing services on private matters; and making direct payments. The formal procedures under which appointments were made facilitated these practices. For the appointment of directors-general, a 'screening committee' of senior officials was set up to recommend the three most suitable candidates. No formal system of application or competition took place. The key decision was the selection of the favoured candidate from the three most suitable (seniority was a paramount consideration and the candidates always came from within the department). It was at this point that the minister's influence might be exerted, but this required 'buying in' to the bureaucratic spoils system, and short-lived ministers often had little leverage. Essentially the system was about distributing the spoils within the ranks.

OCSC introduced reforms to this system under the previous government. It drew up lists of suitably qualified personnel in each department, from whom the screening committees had to select suitable persons. In order to be eligible, senior officers had to attend extensive training sessions organized by the OCSC. Those selected to attend were recommended by the head of the ministry. OCSC also took more control over the appointments screening process, selecting the chairman of the committee and widening the membership. Screening committees were directed to make more detailed, written reports justifying their recommendations. These changes were the first step in the creation of a 'Senior Executive Service' (SES), which was approved in principle in 2000. Rather than transferring all senior staff to an SES, only those who sought transfer and met the conditions for being considered for promotion (as just described) were admitted. Implementation began in 2001 and gathered pace in 2003 (World Bank 2003: 13). The creation of the SES was linked as well with proposals for performance review, merit pay and lateral recruitment.

The performance agreement elements in the budget reform blueprint discussed earlier tied in with these reforms to the senior personnel management system. Thaksin's 'CEO-manager' style emphasised a 'risk and results' orientation as a desirable quality of a public sector executive. The long-term reform agenda favoured by the OPDC favoured such things as open recruitment, performance pay and contractual arrangements for top executives in order to hone the performance of an elite group of senior executives. Again, however, we find echoes of NPM doctrines on performance management expressed symbolically in schemes with clearer political intent. The short-term political agenda deployed this language to legitimize moving out-of-favour officials aside and replacing them with those more sympathetic to the new political climate. Transfers to the 'reserve list' – labelled by one official in the OPDC as a 'rehabilitation centre for retraining the under-performers' – became more frequent.[22] The OPDC pushed ahead, with Thaksin's strong encouragement, in implementing more flexible senior appointments and transfers. In April 2003, a 'fast-track' system of senior appointments was approved to encourage external applicants.[23] Thaksin also supported a proposal to encourage the movement of

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[22] Interview, 3 March 2004; see also footnote 8.
[23] Lateral recruitment from outside the ranks of the civil service was stillborn, however, due to delays and obstacles in amending the civil service regulations.

existing officials between ministries or departments when vacancies occurred. Under the new policies, all vacant senior positions were supposed to be openly announced, but in practice permanent secretaries and others involved continued to favour the insiders (*Bangkok Post*, 23 April 2003). However, change was slowly taking place. In May, a disappointed senior agriculture ministry official shaved his head in silent protest at the appointment of a commerce ministry official as permanent secretary of agriculture (*Bangkok Post*, 23 May 2003; see also Ockey 2004: 149).

On the one hand, these moves were an attempt by the central personnel managers to re-balance the power over senior personnel appointments more in their favour. At the same time, they accommodated the wishes of the Thaksin government to remould the senior levels of the bureaucracy in its own image. However, merit pay, performance review and close external monitoring of departmental personnel decisions were controversial matters. Despite piloting a system of merit pay for the SES it was not fully implemented, as it was widely believed that (in the absence of such things as clear job descriptions and rigorous, objective performance review) the result would be to encourage 'favouritism' (code, perhaps, for shifting power from an established patron to others). Instead, in association with a proposed pay rise, it was proposed to allocate extra 'performance awards' to high-performing departments and agencies for distribution in the form of across-the-board pay supplements. This was clearly a compromise with the existing bureaucratic power-holders. Performance ratings using key performance indicators (referred to earlier in connection with the budget reforms) were implemented by OPDC and the Comptroller General's Department. The cabinet approved a 'challenge' system under which government agencies which chose to take part in the performance awards would be rewarded for meeting ten government performance targets. Enthusiastic compliance with government programs and priorities was, naturally enough, a key performance criterion.

Downsizing was another inherited priority of the pre-Thaksin reform era. A voluntary retirement scheme implemented in two stages in 1999 and 2001 was a partial success. A further scheme was announced in 2003. However, Thaksin linked it with efficiency and anti-corruption, claiming that officials with 'poor or so-so performance' would be 'invited' to enter the program (*The Nation*, 24 November 2003). In the process of implementing this program, reviews of job performance were proposed in two stages, beginning in September 2004. Those found to be in the bottom five percent of performers would be offered re-training. If they failed the second time, they would be asked to leave the service with eight months' severance pay (*The Nation*, 23 September 2004). Rumours about favouritism, seeking of sexual favours and other irregularities in the assessment process stoked widespread hostility and suspicion among civil servants (including many teachers and health workers, from whose ranks were drawn large numbers of party workers and election campaigners) which aroused fears within TRT of an electoral backlash at the 2005 elections. Deputy-prime minister Vishanu announced that the plan would be shelved. The performance assessment period would be extended to two years and outside

bodies as well as the department head would be involved in making the assessments. One reason for this was that some agency heads had failed to find their quota of 'non-performing' staff. For example, only one thousand teachers, less than 0.5 per cent of the total, ended up on the education ministry list of the 'bottom five per cent' (*Bangkok Post*, 25 September 2004).

CONCLUSION

If administrative reform in the 1990s was bureaucratically controlled, faltering and self-serving, then under Thaksin it clearly shifted towards a mandated, increasingly comprehensive reform program under a managerialist banner, with some swift results. However the underlying regime issues remain contested and unresolved. The legal authority and political power inherent in the traditional formal and informal structures of the bureaucratic establishment have not been swept aside over-night, as several examples of delays and compromises have illustrated. They continue to put a brake on politician-led reform, despite the cohesion of the political executive and the subordination of the Parliament. An important element in the administrative reform program is its managerialist rhetoric, which wins the admiration of the international agencies and allows Thaksin to portray it as a modernization strategy. Both before and after Thaksin's rise to power, NPM doctrine has dominated the language that rationalizes administrative reform in Thailand. But just as in the 1990s, NPM was for the most part an ideology of reform, not a concrete program with clear results, so in the hands of the Thaksin government it has played a significant symbolic role. Alongside the rhetoric, the NPM tools we see being put to use by the Thaksin government have been carefully chosen and selectively implemented, alongside others that reveal the underlying political intent.

This selection has been systematically biased towards those instruments that aim to centralize power. So far, devolution and fragmentation of the public sector, which is a core feature of NPM in other countries, is much less in evidence. Equally absent to this point are some of the marketizing, efficiency-driven and consumer-oriented measures such as contracting out and 'customer charters'. The budget reforms and performance management tools, including the CEO-governor initiative, facilitate political management by ministers and the prime minister behind the rhetoric of performance management. In the case of the budgetary reforms, this political control in practice includes enhanced capacity for hands-on prime ministerial pork-barrelling (a form of political micro-management that is antithetical to the rhetoric of NPM). The thread that runs through all of the reforms is that they contribute to a deliberate program to consolidate and to centralize the power of the political executive, and to wrest power and resources away from established bureaucratic channels.

However, there are important areas of uncertainty that remain to be contested and resolved. The strategy to centralise power and control across the bureaucratic machinery is an ambitious one. So long as the currency of bureaucratic and political power remains in part concerned with the division of spoils, the propensity for such a system to become fragmented by 'bossism'

and 'cliquism' is hard to avoid. In challenging existing forms of bureaucratic power and control by deploying new instruments and tools from the NPM 'tool-kit', the result will be new power-holders and alternative networks of influence, not their disappearance. They will, however, be closer to the centre, making it more feasible that they can be controlled from within the prime minister's own circle of political allies and personally appointed officials, but power-sharing is unavoidable, if only at this level.

Moreover, the new forms of management and control will require new bureaucratic institutions and will give rise to forms of power based on the control and administration of the new procedures and techniques. The arbiters of 'performance' and 'success' in meeting targets are to be an array of central agencies and their outside consultants, including those who marshal the data banks needed to make the system work. The consequences of these shifts in bureaucratic power and of the insertion of new forms of expertise will have to be monitored. There is the possibility that over time the new instruments and techniques of performance management and budgeting will acquire substantive legitimacy, in the process institutionalizing some of the values that the technocratic reformers are striving to realise, namely merit, performance and technical rationality. Even Thaksin needs results.

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