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## Populism in Thailand

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### *Introduction*

Before the Asian 1997 financial crisis and the adoption of the 1997 Constitution, Thailand had endured a great number of fluctuations in its political development. The coming of the TRT party and Thaksin Shinawatra in 2001 paved the way for the establishment of new politics in Thailand. The Thaksin administration created a new form of political campaign under the implementation of populist policies to increase public trust in government and improve national well-being such as the thirty baht healthcare scheme, community village funds, agrarian debt relief, One Tambon One Product (OTOP), and so on.

Since Thaksin, populist policies have been widely implemented by successive governments as they provide benefits to the poor. Many policies were created following his administration; for example, the fifteen years of free education program, elderly allowances in the Abhisit Vejjajiva period, and rice pledging scheme and 300 baht minimum wage in the Yingluck Shinawatra period. Populist policies are being used today by the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) in both political and economic aspects such as *pracharat* (civil-state), the “Public-Private-People Partnership,” and the Thai Niyom Yangyuen Program, or “Sustainable Thainess.”<sup>1</sup> This clearly shows that populism can be on the right, left, or in the middle of the political spectrum and can be adapted to all ideologies by both elected and unelected government. Populist policies and leadership also share a set of core values and a certain distinct rhetoric and discourse.<sup>2</sup>

Today, nearly two decades have passed since populist policies began to play a crucial role in Thailand and create change in the political landscape. The functioning of populist policies under the Thaksin administration led to a greater public emphasis on policies than was the case under past political leaders. Populist policies therefore create a competitive atmosphere between political parties during elections and can provide a better quality of life to the people as well.

Hence, it is important to study the social, economic, and political impact and challenges of populist policies in Thailand in order to gain an understanding of their positive and negative aspects. Recommendations to guide policy decision making and prevent populist policies from having an adverse impact are also vital to ensure that fiscal mismanagement and public debt can be avoided in the future.

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<sup>1</sup> Thai Niyom Yangyuen Program, “Foreign Office, Government Public Relations Department.” 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Pasuk Phongpachit and Kosuke Misuno, eds. *Populism in Asia*. NUS Press, 2009.

## Literature Review

Historically, academic definitions of populism have differed and people have often defined populism in loose terms referencing “people,” leaders who have the power of provocation (especially political leaders), and “catch-all politics.” In addition, the term has also been used as a label for new unclassified groups, which have often refused to refer to themselves as “populists.”<sup>3</sup>

More than a decade ago, scholars tried to create definitions to identify and make comparisons to populism. For instance, Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell<sup>4</sup> suggested that populist ideology “pits a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous ‘others’ who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity, and voice.” Some scholars have defined populism in terms of specific social bases, for example Ernesto Laclau<sup>5</sup> or Yves Meny and Yves Surel<sup>6</sup> who tried to define populism as an extension of ideology.

Harry C. Boyte<sup>7</sup> argued in the book “Introduction: Reclaiming Populism as a Different Kind of Politics,” that populist organizing represents the return of “Aristotelian politics” of horizontal interactions among equals who are different for the sake of public problem solving. Populism in this sense offers a broad inclusion of political ideologies, including left-wing, right-wing, and even centrist ideologies.

In his book *What is Populism*, Jan-Werner Müller<sup>8</sup> defined “populism” as an imaginative and unique view of politics advocating that the people have a moral purity and unity in their fight against an elite considered to be morally corrupt. As a result, the main claim of this form of populism is anti-pluralism based on moral issues. Furthermore, in this definition of populism it is necessary to have a representative who claims to be the “mouthpiece” for the people. Müller has written about populist political leaders and identified the following shared characteristics:

1. Populists may claim that they are anti-elitist, but in reality, they are another elite or opposition group obsessed with gaining power. When they do gain power, they simply become another elite.
2. Populists like to use tools such as referendums, which make the people feel involved in achieving their goals, but in reality, populists may not want the people to be involved in politics. After gaining power, they often claim to be on the people’s side to justify political action, but are not open to public participation at all.
3. Populist leaders do not like institutions that come between them and the people, e.g. the media or political parties, and try to broadcast their views directly via social media sites like Facebook or Twitter.
4. Populist political parties are dictatorial in structure. There is only one leader. Party members must follow the leader’s orders.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Canovan. *Populism*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt P, 1981.

<sup>4</sup> Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell, eds. *Twenty-First Century Populism: The Spectre of Western European democracy*. Springer, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Ernesto Laclau. *On Populist Reason*. Verso, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Yves Meny and Yves Surel. *Democracies and the populist challenge*. Springer, 2001.

<sup>7</sup> Harry C. Boyte. “Introduction: Reclaiming Populism as a Different Kind of Politics.” *The Good Society* 21, no.2, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Jan-Werner Müller. *What is populism?* Penguin UK, 2017.

5. Populist leaders endeavor to maintain a firm grip on power. They will stoke divisions by formulating a type of “binary opposition” between their side and the other side, using measures such as acting against terrorists, blaming the mass media as purveyors of fake news, claiming foreign intervention in internal affairs, and accusing anyone they see as a threat of obstruction.
6. When populist leaders gain full control of state power, they govern harshly and openly claim that they do it for the people. They destroy democratic norms and try to consolidate power. If possible, they will amend the constitution to facilitate policy implementation, and also to block criticism and reduce the power of others.

In “Populism: A Very Short Introduction,” Mudde and Kaltwasser<sup>9</sup> highlight not only the existence of populism as a political ideology, but also discuss the phenomenon of “economic populism.” In Latin America, between the 1980s and the 1990s the economists Dornbusch and Edwards<sup>10</sup> and Jeffrey Sachs<sup>11</sup> saw the same form of economic policy in many countries and identified it as “populism.” In economic terms, Mudde defined populism as the enforcement of irresponsible economic policies by a government that spends on a large scale even if it has to increase foreign debt to do so. Such economic policies are likely to result in hyperinflation.<sup>12</sup>

Speaking at the discussion forum “Democracy in the World (devoid of) Democracy,” Kasian Tejapira suggested that populism as proposed by Mudde<sup>13</sup> above need not prevail in the present era, referencing such cases as Alberto Fujimori (Peru) or Carlos Menem (Argentina). When those two political leaders gained power, they turned away from the populist promises they had made and instituted neoliberal policies, including reducing economic governance of the business sector and privatizing enterprises. Kasian further commented that Mudde’s economic populism is still widely evident in Thailand, where the media, elite, and even the military often interpret populism as a condition of irresponsible spending.

In summary, present day populism can be divided into two broad types. The first type is “political populism” as defined by Jan-Werner Müller,<sup>14</sup> the moral ideology of a group of people united in opposition to the immorally corrupt elites. Such a group needs a new leader to represent them and expand their voice. President Donald Trump’s “Make America Great Again” campaign is one such example. Trump wanted to promote nationalism among white Americans and to do so offered himself as the voice of American people dissatisfied with Barack Obama’s neoliberal policies. The second type of populism is “economic populism.” According to Cas Mudde’s definition, economic populism is based on economic policies that convince people to support a particular political party. Such economic populism neglects the interests of people who are not included in the target groups of populist policy, and does not consider the future im-

<sup>9</sup> Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Jeffrey D. Sachs and John Williamson. “External debt and macroeconomic performance in Latin America and East Asia.” *Brooking Papers on Economic Activity* 1985, no.2 (1985): 523-573.

<sup>11</sup> Dornbusch, Rudiger, and Sebastian Edwards. *Macroeconomic Populism in Latin America*. No. w2986. National Bureau of Economic Research, 1989.

<sup>12</sup> Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Mudde and Kaltwasser. *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*.

<sup>14</sup> Jan-Werner Müller, *What is populism?* Penguin UK, 2017.

pacts such policies have on society.<sup>15</sup> An example of economic populism may be observed in the policies implemented in Thailand since the Thaksin Shinawatra period, which have been aimed at exchanging economic benefits for the political popularity of the country's leadership. Current global politics have seen an increasing trend towards new populism. Another approach to or use of populism on the world stage can be seen the cases of Peru and Argentina, as identified by Kasian Tejapira. In these instances, political leaders gained power by making populist promises to certain groups, and then once in power pursued neoliberal economic policies. As a result, the people who voted for these leaders benefited less than was promised. This form and use of populism muddies the waters of the definition and is still under observation.

### ***Context of Thailand***

Populism has been employed in Thailand for many decades, but in the past covered only some aspects of political and economic activity, unlike the universal practice of the Thaksin Shinawatra administration. For example, monetary policy under Prime Minister Kukrit Pramoj in 1975 helped people by providing a budget to develop livelihoods in local communities, but such moves were not widely regarded at the time as populist. More than twenty years later the 1997 constitution opened the door to public participation in the policy decision making process, and in 2001 the TRT party under Thaksin Shinawatra introduced a national populist agenda to attract Thai voters. The Thaksin political campaign promoted policies such as the thirty baht healthcare scheme, a community fund, an agrarian debt relief scheme, loans for education and more. This political strategy helped him win the election and represented a new kind of politics in Thailand, changing the landscape of the policy making process for all political parties. He used populist policies to alleviate poverty and help impoverished people gain access to social services. As a result of these policies, many people were satisfied with and supported the TRT and Thaksin.

Since Thaksin, populism has become a new means for all political parties to win elections. During the Abhisit Vejjajiva administration, the government formulated populist policies to gain popularity and solve national problems. The policies included free education for all, agrarian debt relief, agricultural price guarantees, political reconciliation, and social cohesion. The Yingluck administration provided free tablets to all primary school students across Thailand, improved the Thai education system, improved the pension retirement scheme, operated a rice pledging scheme, introduced a 300 baht minimum wage, and a firstcar home tax rebate policy to gain popular support. Today, populism still plays a role in the approaches of the *National Council for Peace and Order* (NCPO). The current PM, Prayut Chan-o-cha, recently launched a national welfare scheme card as part of the implementation of a "civil state" policy to enforce the national strategic plan by promoting the grass-roots economy and empowering the majority of Thais.

In this paper we will analyze the role of populism in Thailand and show how populist policies have had an impact socially, economically, and politically. Then, we will look at how the adverse impacts of populist policies can be avoided in the future.

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<sup>15</sup> Mudde and Kaltwasser. Populism: A Very Short Introduction.

Table 1.1 indicates the timeline of populist policies implemented by each government in the period between 2001 and 2018.

**Table 1.1** Policies in Thailand

2001-2006	2006-2007	2008-2009	2009-2011	2011-2014	2014 - 2018
Thaksin	Surayut	Samak	Abhisit	Yingluck	Prayut
1. Thirty baht healthcare scheme 2. Community fund 3. Solving poverty 4. Agrarian debt relief scheme 5. Loan for education 6. OTOP 7. War on drugs 8. Civil service reform 9. War against corruption	1. Reconciliation and social cohesion policies 2. Political reform 3. Civil service reform 4. War against corruption	1. OTOP 2. Community fund 3. Free education for all 4. Reconciliation and social cohesion policies 5. Agrarian debt relief scheme 6. Agricultural price guarantee	1. Pension retirement scheme 2. Fifteen years of free education for all 3. 2000 baht help check 4. Reconciliation and social cohesion policies 5. Agricultural price guarantee 6. Loans for education 7. Political reform	1. Thirty baht healthcare scheme 2. Community fund 3. Agrarian debt relief scheme 4. Civil service reform 5. Pension retirement scheme 6. Rice pledging scheme 7. 300 baht per day minimum wage 8. 15,000 baht per month minimum wage for university graduates 9. One laptop per child 10. First-time car buyer home tax rebate policy 11. Thai Women Empowerment Fund	1. Old age and disability pensions 2. Political reform 3. Reconciliation and social cohesion policies 4. Civil state 5. Thai Niyom Yang-yuen Program

Table 1.1 shows the implementation of populist policies in each period of government. The following section will provide more detail on the populist policies of Thaksin, Yingluck and Prayut, respectively.

### ***Populism in Four Periods of Government***

#### ***Populism in the Thaksin Shinawatra Period***

Thaksin became the twenty-third Prime Minister of Thailand on February 17, 2001 and was in power until September 19, 2006. In 2006, his government was overthrown by a military coup d'état following street demonstrations and political conflict. Before forming the government in 2001, Thaksin was well known as a successful business-man. He used political marketing and policy strategy during his five years and 222 days in office, and together with his TRT party launched an array of policies to promote the rural economy and gain popular support from the people. Key examples include the thirty baht healthcare scheme, the agrarian debt relief scheme, and the one million baht village fund.

#### 1. Thirty Baht Health Care Scheme

The thirty baht healthcare scheme was implemented in 2002. This policy gave 48 million Thais access to low-cost health services (less than one USD) and hospital visits. The scheme gained overwhelming support from ordinary Thais and made Thaksin the first PM to focus primarily on the poor.

#### 2. One Million Baht Village Fund Program

Thailand's Village Fund program, was implemented by the TRT government in 2001 and is one of the biggest microcredit schemes in the world. This program saw the distribution of one million baht (USD \$24,000) to each of 78,000 villages. The objective of the village fund was to increase the incomes and asset accumulation of people in rural areas. Moreover, the village fund program decentralized government decision making on rural projects by allowing local communities to create projects for themselves. In the process, it allowed local people to participate more in the decision-making process.<sup>16</sup>

#### 3. The One Tambon One Product Program (OTOP)

The One Tambon One Product program, commonly known as OTOP, was implemented in May 2001 to generate employment and to increase income-earning opportunities, preserve local knowledge, and help overcome poverty in rural areas. The program encouraged citizens to produce original products with materials distinctive to their region, to be sold domestically and internationally.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Patana Tangpianpant. 2010. "A Study of Thaksin's Pro-Poor Populist Policies in Thailand."

<sup>17</sup> Patana Tangpianpant. "A Study of Thaksin's Pro-Poor Populist Policies in Thailand." (2010).

*Populism in the Abhisit Vejjajiva Period*

## 1. Elderly Allowance

The Elderly Allowance was implemented under the Abhisit administration to promote income security for every elderly person in Thailand. People over the age of sixty receive an allowance starting at 600 baht every month for the rest of their lives, with the exception of civil servants, who benefit from a government pension. The allowance rises to a maximum of 1,000 baht a month according to age. In 2011, more than 3.5 million people registered for the elderly allowance, and approximately 6.75 million seniors have benefited from the policy.<sup>18</sup>

## 2. Fifteen Years of Free Education

The government launched the fifteen years of free education program to help 12 million students in Thailand access schooling.<sup>19</sup> However, not every student has benefited, especially those in remote areas. There are also some costs the policy does not cover, for example stationary, clothes, books, food, and accommodation. Thus, parents still have to spend money on these costs.

## 3. 2,000 Baht Help Cheque

The government provided a 2,000 baht help check to all insured persons and to subscribers to the social security system who earn less than 15,000 baht a month. There were 9.7 million people eligible to receive the 2,000 baht help check. The implementation of this project fell under the purview of the Social Security Office, and was an attempt by the government to encourage people to buy goods and products to boost the nation's economy during the period of recession.<sup>20</sup>

*Populism in the Yingluck Shinawatra Period*

## 1. First-time Car Buyer Policy

A first-time car buyer policy was implemented between September 16, 2011 and December 31, 2012 under Yingluck Shinawatra's administration. The aim of the policy was to give low-income citizens an opportunity to buy a new car at a low tax rate. However, the beneficiaries of the first-time car buyer subsidy were not the poor. Instead, the upper income groups, or the Thai middle class, benefited most from the policy. This policy also provided an enormous benefit to automobile companies, which saw increased profits from selling their vehicles.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Democrat Party Thailand. "Progress Report." 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Democrat Party Thailand. "Progress Report." 2017.

<sup>20</sup> "National Help check VS Give Money to the poor, is it different?." *Thairath*, December 2016.

<sup>21</sup> "Overview of Thailand Reform: Populist policies effected to Public Debt." The secretariat of the house of representative, 2015.

## 2. Rice Pledging Scheme<sup>22</sup>

The rice pledging scheme is one of the most well-known populist policies of the Yingluck administration. Before the general election, the Pheu Thai party promised to buy rice from farmers at 15,000 baht per ton (20,000 baht for jasmine rice) which was double the price of the global rice market. The government believed that Thailand could manipulate global prices simply by stockpiling rice the government bought from farmers, and eventually, when supplies on the world market fell, the global price would rise, and the government could sell the rice at a higher price. However, things went wrong when the scheme provided a chance for massive corruption. It affected millions of Thai farmers and had an unprecedented negative impact on Thailand's agricultural industry and economy.<sup>23</sup>

## 3. One Tablet PC per Child

Ahead of the general election in 2011, the Yingluck government promised to give a tablet computer to all grade 1 elementary school students across Thailand. The aim of the policy was to make sure students could access digital data and use technology to improve the quality of their education via electronic devices. Approximately 2.4 million tablets were provided to Thai children during the Yingluck administration. However, after a short implementation period, it was recognized as an inefficient policy because there were problems with the buying process and the low quality of the tablets provided. The total spending on the scheme was 7,000 million baht, most of it benefitting the tablet companies.<sup>24</sup>

## 4. 300 Baht Daily Minimum Wage

The minimum wage of 300 baht per day was implemented for all businesses and jobs in Thailand on January 1, 2013, fulfilling a promise made to Thai workers by the government during the political campaign. The aim of the scheme was to increase the standard of living among workers. The minimum wage policy had a big impact on many businesses in the country, especially, small business enterprises, as the policy led to profit reductions. However, millions of Thai workers benefitted from the policy.<sup>25</sup>

## 5. 15,000 Baht Minimum Wage for University Graduates

The minimum salary for new university graduates increased from the former level of 9,000–12,000 baht monthly up to 15,000 baht per month in 2011 during Yingluck's administration. Based on the principle of income redistribution, all graduate students received the equal standard minimum salary, with no conditions.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Vikram Nehru. "Thailand's Rice Policy Gets Sticky." *East Asia Forum*, June 13, 2012.

<sup>23</sup> "The Politics and Perils of Rice-pledging Scheme and Impact of Yingluck Case." *The Nation*, 2017.

<sup>24</sup> "Overview of Thailand Reform: Populist policies effected to Public Debt." *The Secretariat of the House of Representative*, 2015.

<sup>25</sup> "TDRI Analyze the Benefits/disadvantages of the Minimum Wage of 300 baht per Day." *Bangkokbiznews*, 2012.

<sup>26</sup> "TDRI Analyze the Minimum Wage of 300 baht per day–15,000 for Bachelor's Degree." *Thaipublica*, 2012.



### *Populism in the General Prayuth Chan-ocha Period*

General Prayut Chan-o-cha was the twenty-ninth Prime Minister of Thailand. His government began on August 30, 2014 under the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO). His administration played an important role in stimulating the grass roots economy via the Civil State or *pracharat* project. The government also promoted the twenty-year strategic plan, which is the main project under the NCPO. The details of each of these policies are as follows.

#### 1. Civil State (*pracharat*)

Civil State is a political strategy implemented under the Prayut administration. The terms “civil” and “state” identify that the model is based on a cooperative relationship between the government and the people to create social harmony and stimulate economic, social, and political development. The “Civil State” project aims to improve the quality of life of poor people and reduce poverty in Thailand.<sup>27</sup>

#### 2. Thai Niyom Yangyuen Program

The main objective of Thai Niyom Yangyuen Program is to improve all aspects of living (the economy, society, and security) for all Thais. The Thai Niyom Yangyuen Program is based on ten principles, including the promotion of a social contract between citizens and communities, the provision of social security to impoverished people, the creation a self-reliant culture, the improvement of people’s livelihoods and empowerment of people in remote areas, the promotion of an anti-corruption culture, the establishment of free internet access in the community, and advancement of drug protection policy. The project contributes to the national strategic plan implemented under the NCPO. The government plans to spend money in rural areas to eliminate poverty and increased equality. At the same time, this project encourages people to participate in the government development process under the principle of a sufficiency economy, and also aims to increase the rate of individual saving to reduce household debt.<sup>28</sup>

#### 3. The National Welfare Scheme Card

The national welfare scheme card was launched on October 1, 2017. The objective of this project is to provide 11.67 million low-income Thais<sup>29</sup> with access to basic necessities such as public transportation (Bangkok-based buses, BTS, and MRT), electricity, food, and cooking gas. People with an income lower than 30,000 baht (USD \$ 1,000) per year are eligible to receive 200 baht a month, and those whose income is higher than 30,000 baht but less than 100,000 baht (USD\$ 3,000) per year are

<sup>27</sup> Surasak Popwande. “What is ‘Civil State’ Strategy?” *Popwande Blog*, 2018.

<sup>28</sup> “Thai Sustainable Project Focuses on Participation, Reduce Inequality, and Increase Revenue with Sustainable.” *Thairath*, 2018.

<sup>29</sup> “Welfare Card Scheme Will Help Poor Pay for Basic Needs.” *The Nation*, 2017.

eligible to receive 100 baht a month. All registered low-income earners can use the welfare scheme card to buy food and pay for basic necessities at eligible stores. The card could be used to transfer funds like a general ATM card at Krungthai Bank ATMs from September to December 2018.<sup>30</sup>

## ***Results of Policy Implementation***

### ***Success Factors***

Populism has been the mechanism and approach to alleviating inequality and poverty in Thailand. After Thaksin implemented a populist approach, the public was satisfied with the benefits they received from the policies. Since Thaksin, some populist policies have been created and implemented in response to public demand. Healthcare services have been extended to 48 million people, and the adoption of “citizenship rights” means that everyone in the country has equal access to social services and the same rights to welfare. Thus, a number of scholars agree that populism has resulted in an increased quality of life for the Thai people.

In addition, the democratic movement, the functioning of the constitution, and economic stability were all crucially linked to and associated with the implementation of populist policies. Political parties were a major factor in the increased potential populist policies.

Populism during Thaksin’s government covered many aspects of social services including healthcare services, education, pensions, agrarian debt relief, and a community fund for grassroots citizens. As a result, there was widespread support for the TRT and Thaksin because they promoted necessary redistribution policies which had a direct impact on communities across the country. The success of Thaksin’s populism also had relevance in the democratic context, affecting the approach and policies of all political parties wanting to win elections. Populism became a political tool to increase the majority vote in an election. Finally, the aim of many populist redistributive political policies was to “eliminate poverty” and as such, populism has played a crucial role in addressing poverty in Thailand.

However, populism can naturally also lead to dissatisfaction among the elites, as in any redistribution of wealth the government needs to spend a considerable portion of its budget to implement the required policies. Stakeholders who suffer a loss of benefits do not appreciate a redistributive strategy. As a result, some elites have acted against populist policies and used the term “populism” in an attempt to delegitimize their political opponents.

## ***Positive and Negative Aspects of Populism***

### ***Positive Aspects of Populism***

First, populism has transformed Thai politics from the old election culture of buying support to one of policy competition. Political parties increasingly use populist policies to gain public support and win election. Second, populism has encouraged greater checks on the actions of the government, both through popular movements and through the Parliament. Thirdly, people have become more interested in public policy, resulting in higher

<sup>30</sup> “Approve The National Welfare Scheme Card.” *Khaosod*, 2018.

rates of voter turnout at elections. Many populist policies offer basic guarantees, e.g. the thirty baht healthcare scheme and accessibility to health care for all, but most of them are political tools as well. Lastly, populism can alleviate inequality, because it can lead to the promotion of aspects of social welfare such as health care, education, old age pensions, and allowances for poor people.<sup>31</sup>

### *Negative Aspect of Populism*

Populist policies can have the negative effect of encouraging people to wait for help instead of being self-reliant, and thus many proclaim populist policies create a weakness in the people. Populism can also lead to massive corruption as well as conflicts of interest among political parties. In addition, some populist policies can lead to the abuse of power in the political process and policy implementation as well as increased public debt<sup>32</sup> as happened with the rice pledging scheme which weakened the national economy and deeply affected Thai farmers.

### *Criticism and Analysis*

In a group discussion held by King Prajadhipok's institute on December 12, 2018, experts and academic participants introduced five problems with populist policies. Mechanisms to avoid fiscal mismanagement in the policymaking process and critical recommendations to establish sustainable policies were also part of the group discussion.

### *Problems with Populist Policies in Thailand*

1. Populist policies do not strengthen people's livelihoods by introducing income distribution, job creation, innovation, or opportunity. Rather, many policies create public reliance on the government as people wait for help rather than engaging in self-reliant behavior. The launch of the 500 baht bank-note and the national welfare scheme card under the Prayuth administration are examples of this dependence.
2. Political parties and political leaders attempt to exchange benefits with stakeholders instead of maintaining national benefits, neglecting to provide welfare benefits to improve the well-being of ordinary citizens. Many populist policies were used as a tool to increase public satisfaction with the government, a kind of political marketing to win votes. As a result, many populist policies are impractical when actually put into practice. Policies such as the rice pledging scheme and the first-time car buyer rebates during the Yingluck Shinawatra administration had an enormous impact on the economy, as did the populist policies under the Thaksin, Abhisit and Prayuth administrations. This problem indicates that the government is not prepared to handle any negative consequences that arise following the implementation of populist policies.

<sup>31</sup> Puwak Lit Heimachart. "Populist Policies." *Political Science*, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, 2015.

<sup>32</sup> Heimachart. "Populist Policies."

3. Thailand does not emphasize the role of local government to the extent that most developed countries such as Japan do. This indicates that decentralization in Thailand is still weak. In Japan, local communities are an important mechanism in implementing government policies. This allows for better delegation of responsibility for problem solving in rural areas compared to full implementation by the central government. Thus, increased decentralization is a crucial factor for Thailand to increase the efficiency and sustainability of its policy implementation.
4. Thailand still lacks flexibility in its policymaking process due to the fact that policymakers still fail to understand that different locations present different problems. One policy cannot be applied to the entire country as a solution to various problems. Instead, policymakers need to create responsive policies which are able to be applied in different cultures and socioeconomic contexts in order to promote the national interest to the highest degree possible.
5. Many policies in Thailand are short term. There is no continuation, no evaluation, no collection of data, no analysis, and no monitoring of output, outcomes, consequences, and impact after implementation. In other words, there is a lack of strategy when it comes to policy implementation. As a result, the government has no evidence or output which can demonstrate the pros and cons of previous populist policies. In practice, this translates to the failure of many populist policies, some of which result in severe destruction to society and the economy, as they are in fact impossible to implement.

### ***Recommendations to Create Sustainable Policies***

#### ***The Role of Political Parties and Policymakers***

Political parties should understand the likelihood of successful policy implementation, emphasize the national interest, and be held responsible for the results and consequences of populist policies. Moreover, political parties should not merely emphasize political marketing; instead, all parties should provide opportunities to the public to participate in the policymaking process.

#### ***Flexibility and Decentralization***

In order to achieve the highest level of national benefits, populist policies should be flexible in different locations, because in practice each policy should be applied in consideration of the specific culture and context of the community. Moreover, the central government should support the participation of local communities in policy decision making by decentralizing power and encouraging local government organizations, including local people, to design their own policies. More importantly, monitoring should be considered and encouraged after policy implementation to ensure that each policy successfully achieves its intended outcome.

#### ***The Preventive Measure via Law and Regulations***

Before policy implementation, the state needs to mandate preventive measures to avoid financial mismanagement and negative consequences of populist policies. Fortunately, Article 142 of the 2017 Constitution states

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that the introduction of an annual appropriations bill must show the sources of revenues and estimated revenues, expected outcomes or output from payments, and conform with the National Strategy and development plans in accordance with the rules prescribed in the law on financial and fiscal discipline of the State. As a result, all governments have to be fiscally disciplined and formulate policies under the guidance of the new Constitution to protect against the adverse impact of populist policies.

### *Classification of Good and Bad Populist Policies*

Concerning Article 142 of the new constitution, it is necessary to classify what is considered a “good” and “bad” populist policy in order to ensure that people are not prohibited from fully exercising and enjoying their social rights. In other words, the law must protect people’s right to welfare. Therefore, welfare benefits should be considered positive populist policies, while in contrast negative populist policies must be terminated when they no longer solve the problems which they target.

### *Conclusion and Recommendations*

In conclusion, populism has been embedded in Thai society for almost two decades. Populism, or *prachaniyom*, has both positive and negative aspects. It is an approach that can provide benefits to the public, but absent regulation it can result in fiscal problems as well. Even though populism has increased public satisfaction with political parties and established a culture of policy competition, it has also shown that it can have impacts on social economic and politics. First, populist policies interact with the fiscal dimension, and thus policy budgets need to incorporate checks and balances by non-governmental organizations or monetary institutions to ensure accountability in the implementation process. There also needs to be an economic strategy to maintain policies in the long run. Sustainability is a major challenge for the government and the good management of economic mechanisms and economic growth is essential in order to sustain good populist policies in the future.

Second, populism is relevant to the redistribution of wealth, and the implementation of populist policies impacts stakeholders as a result, especially the taxpayer. Therefore, the challenge is how to persuade stakeholders to support populist measures and prevent fiscal mismanagement and corruption via checks and balances.

Lastly, a populist approach can result in unsustainable policies that are implemented without good management and a strategic economic plan. In the long run, policies such as the rice pledging scheme, PC tablets for students, first-time car buyer rebates, and the launch of the 500 baht banknote will lead to fiscal problems and increased public debt. To address such problems, the function of laws and regulations should be considered. Thailand has experienced the negative side of populist policies, and the 2017 Constitution includes measures to prevent future massive corruption and fiscal mismanagement. There are strict regulations on the source of government income to implement policies. Such measures will control the rise of the negative consequences of populism. As a result, all governments have to practice fiscal discipline and formulate policies

according to regulations and the Constitution.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, there are two challenges which populism poses. The first is how to ensure that populism is a mechanism that guarantees welfare benefits to the public, and how to avoid a dependency culture. The second is how the government can balance financial management and policy implementation in order to create sustainability in both the fiscal and operational dimensions. More importantly, populism can improve citizen well-being in the long run, and therefore, in the Thai context at least, political parties should be encouraged to implement positive populist policies to alleviate inequality and future conflicts of interest.

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