

Book review: Tom Plate (2011). Conversations with Thaksin - From Exile to Deliverance: Thailand's Populist Tycoon Tells His Story

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Tom Plate (2011).

***Conversations with Thaksin – From Exile to Deliverance:
Thailand’s Populist Tycoon Tells His Story.***

Singapore: Marshall Cavendish. ISBN 978-981-4328685. 249 pages.

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Nearly seven years after the coup that ousted Thailand’s Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, a reincarnation of the Thai Rak Thai party, the Phuea Thai party, came to power once again. The astounding landslide victory in the 2011 general election saw the country’s first female Prime Minister, Thaksin’s younger sister Yingluck Shinawatra. With campaign posters saturating the landscape and displaying slogans such as “Thaksin thinks, Phuea Thai acts”, as well as periodic reports of Skype cabinet meetings with Thaksin orchestrating party politics as mediation in policy, there is no doubt that the ex-Prime Minister is very much involved in Thai politics, albeit from afar. Exile, it seems, has not curbed the passions and political relevance that are critical to the former Prime Minister’s survival, return, and possible political rehabilitation. As Thaksin is currently in self-exile in protest against a politically influenced and biased judicial system and has multiple criminal cases pending, the exigencies surrounding his sister and vanguard political party have become central to dealing with the allegedly compromised judiciary.

Tom Plate’s book is based on interviews garnered over a week’s time, which allowed the academic and ex-journalist unprecedented access to the *man* (Thaksin) in Dubai. A recurring dichotomy becomes evident in this book: Is Thaksin the unrepentant democrat or chastened autocrat? The ex-Prime Minister often reveals himself to be an unfairly judged and accosted supporter of the poor or “the people” in general. Simultaneously, he acknowledges serious mishandling of critical domestic issues such as the Southern Muslim insurgency and, most importantly, his gross misjudgment of antagonisms with the palace, which may have led to his current exile. Nonetheless, this book is interesting in terms of how the author approaches the rise of Thaksin in functional order, his exile, and alleged indirect comeback via

his younger sister. The author attempts to draw Thaksin into the critical realm of his deposition and investigates who was really behind his ouster by referring to the royal institution and his confrontations with privy councilor Prem Tinsulanonda, who is considered one of the most influential and instrumental figures in the palace political complex (p. 145). Confrontation with the royal institution is perhaps the most crucial aspect that the author addresses, albeit in a conservative manner. The reasons for the ambiguity in addressing the royal institution are of course Thailand's current polarized political climate and legal redress to Article 112 of the criminal code, better known as the *lèse-majesté* law. This highlights the still simmering undertones of Thai political economy where the extremely popular ex-Prime Minister stands, due to his electoral success, in direct confrontation with Thailand's most revered figure and its institutional machinery.

The author also provides the lay reader with a basic understanding of Thaksin, the man and politician, using a historical/journalistic approach to lend substance to the content. The author's elaboration on personal notes of what it is like to be in exile, traveling as a luxurious vagabond, and the very personal politics of the region are of interest regarding the conception of Thai politics since Thaksin's exile. Personal politics are demonstrated in Thaksin's close relationship with Hun Sen, the Prime Minister of Cambodia, and the very real friction and conflict this caused, not to mention the domestic criminal proceedings, which determine his continued absence. Plate's book depicts Thaksin as a political chameleon, but nonetheless focuses on his democratic credentials and support for Thailand's forgotten millions whom he gave a voice through policy.

However, the volume lacks depth in terms of critical issues such as the role of the monarchy, which is self-evident in light of Wikileaks revelations concerning the palace's role in the 2006 coup as well as Thaksin's alleged abuse of power and nepotism. Furthermore, it is unclear whether the author simply could not get further information out of Thaksin or if he just took his words at face value throughout the text. This point continues throughout the book, as Thaksin's story is told one-sidedly, with a mere depiction, not a discussion, of alternative views. The volume does, however, provide readers with a glimpse into the political mind of what Newsweek magazine considered the potential future leader of Asia in 2004. The vindictive nature of contemporary Thai politics and the lack of legitimacy of court decisions and

diplomatic initiatives against Thaksin are brought forth very assertively. In hindsight, it becomes apparent that ultimate vindication may very well await Thaksin in the future if events continue to unfold.

Using a clear journalistic style, this book is easily accessible to readers, and thereby avails itself to people with an interest in South-East Asian politics and former strongmen of the region such as Lee Kwan Yuu and Mahathir Mohammad. What remains to be seen in the final chapter is whether Thaksin's sister Yingluck can capitalize on her brother's legacy and continue it, eventually bringing him home and extending the nascent democracy in Thailand without antagonizing conservative forces.

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