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political landscape and managed to consolidate his power like no other Thai leader has done in decades. His domination, agenda and ambition has affected everyone – from poor villagers grappling with their first mobile phones to the bewildered fans of Liverpool and Fulham football clubs in England.

He divided and ruled, literally. Despite a landslide victory in general elections twice in a row, the country was split politically under him like never before. The principles of political science were thrown upside down as the nation grappled with his good intentions, and those not so good.

*The Economist* linked his fate to that of the country's democracy, deploring relentless street protests against his reign as a blow to the political system.

Perhaps *The Economist's* adamant defence of a leader it had once teased and called a "Thai Con" is the best testament to Thaksin's influential presence. On the one hand, the prestigious news

magazine acknowledged "some of his authoritarian ways and eye-popping conflicts of interest", while it decried civil uprising against those flaws. In commentaries that all but ignored serious cases of suspected corruption, *The Economist* stated that the bottom line was that Thaksin remained strongly supported by the majority of Thai voters, therefore forcing him out of office means "That the fabric of any democracy is bound to fray, let alone one that has existed for only 14 years and still lies under the shadow of crown and gun".

Only Thaksin can stimulate that kind of thinking. It all began in Thailand when his most vocal critics turned a blind eye to his dubious practices and agenda. To his share-concealment scandal, the Alpine Golf Course controversy, the alleged abuse of the Anti-Money Laundering Office's power, his son Panthongthae's university exam fiasco, and the government's tendency to muffle criticism. He escaped initial scrutiny and it changed the way people measured the moral standards of national leaders.

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Thailand's fight for political decency and reform, which brought about the 1997 "People's Constitution" became something "disruptive". Calls for a good system of accountability and transparency gave way to an "Everyone screws up once" mentality.

The belief that we need a good system in order to have good politicians was overwhelmed by the argument that Thaksin was indispensable.

Two years into his leadership he had shaken up the bureaucracy. He had won the hearts of grassroots workers with controversial populist policies. Meanwhile the country's political-morality barometer had started to slide. It was now all right for a prime minister to own a golf course and clubhouse estate built on a piece of land "stolen" from a temple.

Interference with the media was not a breach of democracy, but a shrewd, even laudable tactic, to consolidate political power. The failure to pay hundreds of millions of baht in tax had become an "honest mistake".

It was under his reign that politics greatly affected everyone. His fast moves endeared him to many in the business community, but blatant nepotism alienated others, and lack of social participation in crucial state economic policies threatened to sabotage some commendable programmes.

Meanwhile, the grassroots benefited, albeit in the short term, from his need to escape his own notorious past and survive the growing mistrust of the middle-class and the elite. To the latter groups, meanwhile, disillusionment turned to resentment and obsessive dissent arose.

Something close to a peaceful civil rebellion emerged late last year, and the rule books of political scientists had to be rewritten, defying democratic principles as it did.

Even now all we know is that the country's future is closely linked to what a tycoon-turned-politician decides to do.

Whether he leaves permanently or returns in triumph could reveal some very damning truths about Thailand's relationship with democracy.