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(*) Corresponding author

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POLITICAL PARTY INSTITUTIONALIZATION FROM A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE: THE CASE OF THAILAND

Wichuda Satidporn¹, Stithorn Thananithichot^{2*}

¹Srinakharinwirot University - Bangkok, Thailand  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2918-7510> ✉ wichudas@g.swu.ac.th

²King Prajadhipok's Institute - Bangkok, Thailand  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9273-6565> ✉ stithorn@kpi.ac.th

Abstract: *This article examines the importance of institutionalizing political parties in developing democracy. This article develops the conceptual framework of the institutionalization of political parties, which combines institutionalization factors in both internal and external dimensions and applies this conceptual framework to extract lessons on the institutionalization of political parties in various democratic countries, including Thailand. The results of applying the aforementioned conceptual framework, in particular to the case of Thailand, indicate that the failure to apply the notion of institutionalization to political parties in this country stems from the traditionally narrow-minded approach to considering the institutionalization of political parties rather than problems with the idea itself. Thus, this article suggests that building an institution for a political party is something that can be designed by giving importance to the development of political parties in a structured manner, along with promoting political parties to have the ability to play a solid political role under the democratic regime.*

Keywords: *Institutionalization; Political Parties; Thailand*

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of political parties that have been quickly and continuously successful in elections due to the prominence of party leadership, coupled with the utilization of open data, digital technology, and new media in various countries during the past decades, has made the idea of political party institutionalization questionable, both in terms of the modernization of the concept and in terms of the merits of applying it as a way to strengthen political parties (Gerbaudo 2018; Margetts 2006). However, the lessons learned from the development of political parties in both old and new democratic countries presented in many recent studies confirm that, in theory, the idea of political party institutionalization is still important and necessary for the development and strengthening of political parties (Hicken and Kuhonta 2015; Scarrow, Wright, and Gauja 2022). In practice, institutionalized political parties can play vital roles in promoting the stability and sustainability of democracy, whether from the experience of old democratic countries such as the United Kingdom (Webb and Bale 2021) and the United States (Schattschneider, Eric, and Pearson 2017), those with progressive democracies such as Germany (Klüver and Iñaki 2016), Japan (Krauss and Pekkanen 2018), New Zealand (Gauja 2016), and South Korea (Hellmann 2014), or even countries with a transitional democracy such as Indonesia (Tan, Hicken, and Kuhonta 2015) and Colombia (Piñeiro Rodríguez and Rosenblatt 2020).

This article emphasizes the importance of building up the institutionalism of political parties in developing democracy. It emphasizes that establishing institutionalism in political parties

necessitates prioritizing the structural development of political organizations, concurrently enhancing their capacity to fulfill robust political roles within democratic regimes. The content of this article is divided into six sections, consisting of, first, an introduction; second, a review of the relevant literature in order to develop a conceptual framework for the institutionalization of political parties; third and fourth, the results of applying the concept of institutionalization of political parties in order to consider the institutionalization of political parties and the approach to institutionalization of political parties in several democratic countries; fifth, a discussion that extracts the lessons-learned on the institutionalization of political parties in Thailand; and sixth, an overview of the content and recommendations for improving constitutional provisions and related laws as a guideline for pursuing the institutionalization of political parties in Thailand.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF POLITICAL PARTIES

In reviewing the idea of the institutionalization of political parties, one of the most influential and frequently cited explanations in the study of political parties and the political party system appears in Samuel Huntington's book "Political Order in Changing Societies". Huntington (1968) values the strength of political institutions, including political parties, and has laid out four benchmarks of political institutions: (1) adaptability is the ability to survive environmental challenges and to have a long life; (2) complexity is the presence of internal divisions to perform a variety of different functions; (3) autonomy is the freedom to work according to one's ideology, free from the dominance of any social group; and (4) coherence is unity and consensus. Samuel Huntington's political institution benchmarks have been criticized for their emphasis on internal or organizational institutionalization (internal/organizational dimension), whereas the particular institutionalization of a political party requires consideration from an external dimension or systemic institutionalism (external/systematic dimension).

The main external dimensions of institutionalism, or systemic institutionalism, are (1) a stable pattern of interparty competition and (2) recognition from other political actors as legitimate and necessary for democracy (parties viewed as legitimate and necessary) (Hicken and Kuhonta 2015; Bizzarro, Hicken, and Self 2017).

The conceptual framework for the institutionalization of political parties used in this article considers the experience of the institutionalization of political parties in many democratic countries and then precisely focuses on Thailand. The conceptual framework was developed by combining the internal dimension of a political party's institutionalization according to Huntington's four standards of political institutions with the institutional dimension of a political party, together with two other external political parties or systemic institutions (Table 1).

Table 1: Institutional Dimensions and Indicators under the Concept of Institutionalization for Political Parties
(Source: Authors’ depiction)

Institutional Dimensions	Indicators
Internal/Organizational Dimension	(1) Adaptability (2) Complexity (3) Autonomy (4) Coherence
External/Systematic Dimension	(1) Stable pattern of interparty competition (2) Parties viewed as legitimate and necessary

INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN DEMOCRATIC COUNTRIES: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

The dimensions of institutionalism and the indicators under the concept of the institutionalization of political parties are applied to consider the political parties in several democratic countries. In terms of internal dimensions or organizational institutions, an institutionalized political party is a political party that can adapt and survive challenging environments. Pressure from change can arise both from outside, such as changes in the electoral system and the provisions of relevant laws, and from within the political party, such as changes in the individuals holding important positions in the party, such as the leader or executive committee members. Parties that have continued to exist and that have achieved electoral success while the country is undergoing significant political reforms through election system improvements, such as the Liberal Democratic Party in Japan (Krauss and Pekkanen 2018) and the Labor Party and the National Party in New Zealand (Gauja 2016), exemplify the institutionalized political party’s ability to adapt to external challenges. Meanwhile, the centuries-old roots of large political parties, namely the Conservative Party and the Labour Party in the UK, the Democratic Party and the Republican Party in the United States, and the Social Democratic Party and the Christian Democratic Union in Germany, are evidence that the longevity of an institutional political party does not depend on the political life of a particular political leader or a particular family (Webb and Bale 2021; Schattschneider, Eric, and Pearson 2017; Klüver and Iñaki 2016). The ability to adapt to the challenges that may come from outside and inside the political parties in these countries also plays an essential role in ensuring the continuity and strength of the democracies in these countries (Poguntke et al. 2016; Scarrow, Webb, and Poguntke 2017).

In addition to the ability to adapt, institutionalized political parties also need to organize their organizational structure so that responsibilities are distributed among various sub-departments or branches. This helps political parties maintain the loyalty of their members and adapt to new changes and demands, allowing for the division of labor according to aptitude, which can increase efficiency in the party’s performance. The growth and establishment of local political parties in Indonesia during the post-Suharto era is a vivid example of how complex organizational structures, whether divisions are based on line or function, can be challenging to achieve and that spatial distribution is an essential condition for the institutionalization of political parties (Tan, Hicken, and Kuhonta 2015).

In addition, political parties with internal or organizational institutions will be independent in their work according to their ideology and without being interfered with or dominated by the interests of any person or a particular social group. Independent political parties are resilient and can always

cope with new political and social forces. The collapse of the political institutionalization of the main political party system in Colombia since the 1990s exemplifies a failure to institutionalize political parties because the political parties have been independent and dominated and interfered with until they were unable to play a role according to their ideologies (Piñeiro Rodríguez and Rosenblatt 2020). Meanwhile, political parties with inside power or institutionalization need to have solidarity with the continual activities of political parties. This solidarity does not undermine the principle of independence as it defends against the intrusion of external destructive forces. The multi-party system has often been dissolved and merged to form new ones, producing the longevity of political parties in South Korea, for example (Shin 2020). This is an example of a political party system that cannot institutionalize a political party because it lacks unity and solidarity and cannot sustain a consensus.

However, when institutionalization is considered from the point of view of the external dimension or as a systemic institution, the adoption of the rules of political competition through elections is the only means of obtaining legitimacy among politicians and political parties, no matter whether the change is made by polarization or by choosing a new political side, allows political parties that may still have internal institutional or organizational institutions in many countries, such as the political parties in Indonesia, Colombia, and South Korea, to be the main actors that play a role in maintaining a stable democracy (Heo 2018). With such a role played by political parties, democracy in the countries mentioned above has survived the interference of undemocratic external forces until now.

In summary, the institutionalization of political parties is, stated clearly, the process by which a political party can establish its identity through the convergence of patterns of behavior and values from both inside and outside the party (Randall and Svåsand 2002). For this reason, an individual must not dominate institutionalized political parties but a party with supporters that have strong and stable ties with the party (Hicken and Kuhonta 2015). In other words, institutionalized political parties should have a relatively low volatility in obtaining popular voters. They also should receive the high trust of people and sufficient political and administrative resources (Bizzarro, Hicken, and Self 2017).

Therefore, the institutionalization of political parties determines the differences in the political party system in each country (Mainwaring 2015). It also determines how political parties form and how they play their role in politics (Mainwaring 2016). Under this view, the development of democracy in different countries is often based on a fundamental mindset that political parties and political party systems can be designed through institutional design or constitutional or statutory laws or regulations (Negretto 2009; D'Anieri 2015).

GUIDELINES FOR CREATING INSTITUTIONALIZATION FOR OVERSEAS POLITICAL PARTIES

The lessons learned reflected through the development of political parties in different countries presented in the previous section of this article and other progressive democratic countries show that the use of constitutional provisions and related laws as tools for the institutionalization of political parties is often carried out using at least two approaches. First, there would be provisions under the constitution and relevant laws stipulating what an institutionalized political party is, what kind of organizational structure is to be established, and what political roles and duties the party has.

Second, there would be provisions under the constitution and relevant laws creating a political environment conducive to the desirable role of political parties.

An example of provisions in the constitution and party law aimed at institutionalizing political parties according to the first approach is the provisions of the German Constitution, which seeks to make political parties political organizations in which people can participate freely in forming their political will (Corduener 2018). Many provisions under the German Constitution also attempt to make political parties have a democratic internal organization, have an open and verifiable financial control system, and have no approach aimed at destroying or overthrowing democracy or threatening the existence of the Federal Republic of Germany (Rosa 2017). In some countries, such as Sweden, there is the idea of encouraging political parties to play a significant role in the parliamentary process. Therefore, provisions in the law relating to establishing political parties have been issued to ensure that parties have broad connections with the people. The Swedish electoral law, for example, requires that the application for registration to form a political party must be made by submitting a written application to the Central Election Authority, with a document stating the name of the party and proof of approval with the support of at least 1,500 eligible voters (Piccio 2012). In addition, in many countries, there are laws specifying the source of income and expenditure checks of a particular political party or such matters have to be categorized into specific sections in political party law or electoral law in order to strengthen parties' independence from domination, direction, or interference from any social force (Gunlicks 2019; Norris and Abel van Es 2016). This is an essential element that would enable political parties to develop into political institutions that are trusted and politically legitimate.

As for the approach based on the provisions of the constitution and relevant laws to create a political environment conducive to the desirable role of political parties, it can be said that according to the general definitions used by political scientists to define political parties, a political party is a voluntary grouping of people to carry out ongoing political activities. This group of people shares political ideas or ideologies or economic, political, or social benefits consistently. The integration of political parties under this common principle aims to play a political role in the system by influencing or having a role in shaping public policy in the form of government or enacting legislation through the powers of parliament (Russell and Cowley 2016; Schattschneider, Eric, and Pearson 2017). The constitutions and political party laws of most liberal democracies, therefore, often contain provisions that promote political parties to be political institutions that are intermediaries in connecting people, social and interest groups, and party members to political institutions such as governments, parliaments, etc. In order to promote such a role of political parties, provisions in the constitutions and political party laws of liberal democracies focus on factors and conditions that vary depending on the context of the democratic development in each country. In New Zealand, for example, a country with high pluralism, electoral laws specify the design of a district-to-proportion electoral system to encourage political parties to play a meaningful role in representing the interests of the people who support them (Gauja 2012).

Further, Indonesia has experienced the weakness of political parties under a political system that restricts the establishment and operation of political parties (Reuter 2015). The political parties and electoral laws have been reformed to be more open and to promote the role of the representation of the political parties' interests in both physical areas and in terms of ideological (religious) beliefs (Ulum 2020).

Additionally, South Korea requires political parties to nominate at least 50 percent of female candidates in the party-list system and 30 percent in single-member districts at the national election (Yoon and Shin 2015, 188). As an incentive, the South Korean Political Fund Act also allows political parties that successfully implemented female quotas in single-member districts to access political funds from the state budget. In particular, financial subsidies are granted to qualifying parties to subsidize the campaign of female candidates (Shin and Kwon 2022).

A political party can gain popularity and widespread public support if it recruits qualified individuals to join as members rather than focusing on quantity. The constitutions and political party laws of many liberal democracies contain provisions aimed at giving political parties the ability to play a role in member recruitment and a system for selecting party representatives to run in elections and to hold quality political positions (Hazan and Gideon 2006, 2010; Hazan 2014). The design of the rules allowing political parties to play such roles effectively also contributes to the promotion of political parties as political organizations that play an important role in building political leaders through the mechanism of political leadership development (Dickinson 2018). This can be seen in the examples of advanced democracies with quality political leaders (such as the United States, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Japan, etc.), even though those leaders in the past may have been actors, businessmen, religious, military, academics, and other professions before, but have been able to become outstanding political leaders by forging the political leadership of a political party (Baturu 2016; Ludwig 2002; O'Brien 2015).

In addition to their role in forming political leaders, political parties in many countries are also designed and supported to play an essential role in political education based on their party's philosophy, beliefs, ideology, ideals, principles, and methods. This role is crucial in ensuring the confidence of the voters and ultimately in choosing the said political party to run the country (Hofmeister 2011; Gökçe, Apari, and Gündüz 2015). Such roles can also be extended abroad. For example, the institutionalization of political parties by promoting political parties to play a role in educating the people is most prominent in the case of the German political parties that promote the work of foundations that are of great importance and that are closely linked to political parties and funded by state funds to strengthen democracy in developing countries (Carothers 2015).

LESSONS LEARNED ON THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN THAILAND

Thailand has been committed to institutionalizing political parties by establishing key principles for political party design in the constitution and enacting specific political party legislation (Huang and Thananithichot 2018; Ziegenhain 2015). However, one key problem has hindered the success of this commitment when compared to other sustainable democratic countries. The issue stems from an emphasis on an approach that relies on constitutional provisions and related laws to define political parties' characteristics, organizational structure, and roles. Meanwhile, there is little emphasis on an approach based on using the constitution and relevant laws to create a political environment conducive to desirable roles for political parties. An example of this problem is the Organic Act on Political Parties, BE 2560 (2017), which strictly regulates the establishment of political parties, including the qualifications of individuals to come together to form a political party, structural elements, party management, and the content scope that is required in the formulation of party

regulations. This Organic Act also stipulates the composition and responsibilities of the political party's executive committee. The political activities under the principles of democratic governance with the King as Head of State are to be carried out by any political party each year, including what needs to be done within a specified period for a political party to maintain a continual legal status that prioritizes the number of members and party branches.

Clear rigor in determining the establishment and activities of political parties reflects that the current Political Parties Act provides guidelines for institutionalizing political parties. These guidelines aim to institutionalize Thai political parties in an internal or organizational dimension rather than an external or systemic one. This has helped many Thai political parties successfully form a party and carry out various party activities as required by law. However, they sometimes have failed to achieve the most important goal of forming a political party: to win an election until it gains an opportunity to form a government and implement the party's policies as national policy based on the party's ideology. On the other hand, the official data on Thai political parties also indicate that the political party that succeeded in the 2019 election was an institutionalized political party in its internal dimension or institutionalization that met the minimum criteria designed by the Organic Act on Political Parties, BE 2560 (2017).

The Palang Pracharat Party, whose members have been elected as members of the House of Representatives up to 116 seats and who have received more than 8,000,000 votes from the people of the country, is a party with four political party branches, equal to the minimum criteria prescribed by the Organic Act cited above, stipulating that political parties must take action within one year from the date of registration by the registrar. Moreover, this party does not have a single provincial political party representative. It has approximately 20,000 members, which is higher than the minimum required by the Organic Act on Political Parties BE 2560 (2017), which stipulates that political parties must have at least 5,000 members within one year from the date of their registration by the registrar and must increase the number of members to not fewer than 15,000 members within four years from the date of registration of the registrar. In contrast, political parties that have more members than the Palang Pracharat Party, such as the Thai Nation Power Party, and the parties with fewer members but more political party branches and representatives of the provincial parties than the Palang Pracharat Party, such as the Thai People Justice Party and the People Reform Party, have only one member elected as a member of the House of Representatives and received less than 75,000 votes from the people of the country (Table 2).

Table 2: Number of Party Members and Number of Party Branches Compared with Votes and Number of MPs that New Political Parties Established Under the Organic Act on Political Parties, BE 2560 (2017) Received in the 2019 General Election (Source: Election Commission of Thailand 2019)

Party	Members*	Branches*	Representatives*	Votes**	Number of MPs**
<i>Palang Pracharath Party</i>	21,277	4	0	8,441,274	116
<i>Future Forward Party</i>	43,579	5	20	6,330,617	81
<i>New Economy Party</i>	3,652	0	0	486,273	6
<i>Prachachat Party</i>	11,973	5	0	481,490	7
<i>Action Coalition Party</i>	16,160	11	30	415,585	5
<i>Thai People Power Party</i>	5,978	0	0	80,186	1

Party	Members*	Branches*	Representatives*	Votes**	Number of MPs**
<i>Thai Nation Power Party</i>	24,385	0	0	73,421	1
<i>Pracha Piwat Party</i>	14,266	0	0	69,431	1
<i>Phalang Thai Rak Thai Party</i>	9,069	0	0	60,434	1
<i>Thai Civilized Party</i>	3,597	0	0	60,354	1
<i>Prachaniyom Party</i>	17,927	1	0	56,264	1
<i>Thai People's Justice Party</i>	17,829	8	24	48,037	1
<i>People Reform Party</i>	10,621	4	41	45,420	1
<i>Bhollamuangthai Party</i>	4,319	0	0	44,961	1
<i>New Palangdharma Party</i>	9,009	4	0	35,099	1

In addition to mainly focusing on building up the institutionalization of political parties in their internal dimension or organizational institutionalization, the provisions of the Organic Act cited above address the termination of political party status and the dissolution of political parties. The reasons for the termination of political parties encompass a wide range. These include minor administrative matters, such as the failure to amend regulations within the specified period or the failure to carry out activities stipulated in the law—such as the absence of political party meetings or no political activities for a consecutive period of one year without any legal grounds. Termination may also occur for serious acts, such as attempting to overthrow the democratic regime with the king as the head of state or obtaining power to rule the country through means that do not follow the methods provided in the constitution. These provisions have been in effect since the Organic Act on Political Parties, BE 2560 (2017). It appears that political parties have not been able to operate according to the conditions prescribed by law, resulting in the cessation of 49 political parties. The constitutional court has ordered the dissolution of three political parties: the Thai Raksa Chart Party, Future Forward Party, and Tairaktham Party (as of January 22, 2023). The provisions relating to the cessation of political party status and the dissolution of such political parties do not help to create the institutionalization of political parties in the external or systemic dimensions. These provisions may also result in political parties not being recognized by other political actors as legitimate, making them viewed as unnecessary for democracy.

CONCLUSION

Why are the political parties in non-progressive democratic countries not politically institutionalized? This can be because the idea of creating institutionalization for political parties is outdated or because the ways of strengthening the institutionalization of political parties in many countries “miss the point”. The answers gained from both the theoretical review, and exposure to the experience of different countries within this article demonstrate that the concept of the institutionalization of political parties is also of great importance for understanding political parties and for seeking ways to develop them as one of the key actors of democratic governance. The failure to apply the notion of institutionalization to political parties in some countries stems from the traditionally narrow-minded approach to considering the institutionalization of political parties rather than problems with the idea itself. As this article shows, the conceptual framework for the institutionalization of political parties is a combination of views on the institutionalization of political

parties from within or organizational institutions and views on the institutionalization of political parties from the external end or systemic institution. The conceptual framework is then applied to consider the institutionalization of political parties in various democratic countries, including Thailand. This concludes that building an institution for a political party is something that can be designed by giving importance to the development of political parties in a structured manner, along with promoting political parties to have the ability to play a solid political role under the democratic regime.

These conclusions lead to recommendations for improving the provisions of the Constitution and the Organic Act on Political Parties, BE 2560 (2017) of Thailand. The first recommendation is to lay out guidelines for political parties to have a flexible administrative structure, allowing each party to play an ideological political role without domination, direction, or interference from any social force. One important approach that should be set in parallel is the stipulation of the provision that encourages political parties to establish branches or sub-units at the local level. Well-functioning political party branches or any sub-units at the local level will provide an important mechanism for the party in linking the interests of party members, social and interest groups, and the public to enter the process of the leading institutions that use political power effectively, such as the government and the parliament. In addition, in order to promote the independence of political parties, there should be provisions to regulate their financial system, which would focus not only on determining sources of income and examining expenditures but also requiring that the money for all political spending be in the income-expense account of the political party.

Further, there must be a way to ensure consistency between the party's income and the expenses that the party pays out. In parallel with the design of the financial control system, it is essential to adjust the rules governing the allocation of funds for the development of political parties. This adjustment should align with the guidelines for institutionalizing political parties, addressing both internal and organizational dimensions and external and systemic dimensions. Instead of allocating a large proportion based solely on party fees (number of members) and votes received in elections, as is currently the case, a more comprehensive approach is recommended. It is also worth considering how to provide subsidies to opposition parties, as was the case with the United Kingdom, as a way to encourage opposition political parties to carry out various activities so that their powers and duties are effectively equal to those of the members of the government political parties. Finally, the provisions relating to the cessation of political party status and the dissolution of such political parties mentioned in the Organic Act should be revised, and only actions that have a serious impact on democracy and actions where all party members must share responsibility should be maintained.

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Wichuda Satidporn: Supervision, conceptualization, writing - reviewing, editing.

Stithorn Thananithichot: Methodology, investigation, writing - original draft, visualization.

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