

The Irony of Democratization and the Decline of Royal Hegemony in Thailand

Kasian Tejapira*

I intend to approach the current decade-long political crisis in Thailand from two perspectives: power shift and cultural political hegemony. From a comparative historical point of view, the current crisis fits into a pattern of cyclical power shifts in modern Thai politics in which an initial opening/liberalization of the economy led to the emergence of a new class/social group, which in turn grew and rose to politically challenge the existing regime of the old elites and their allies. An extended period of political contest and turmoil ensued, with varying elements of radical transformation and setback, reaction and compromise, which usually ended in a measure of regime change. A remarkable feature of the ongoing power shift in Thailand is the ironic reversal of political stance and role of the established urban middle class, who have turned from the erstwhile vanguard democratizers of the previous power shift into latter-day anti-democratizers of the current one, with the globally dominant ideology of liberal democracy being torn asunder as a result. The preferred strategy of recent anti-democratic movements has been violent street politics and forceful anarchic mass occupation of key administrative, business, and transportation centers to bring about socioeconomic paralysis, virtual state failure, and government collapse. The aim is to create a condition of un-governability in the country that will allow the movement's leaders to exploit King Bhumibol's hard-earned hegemonic position and the deep-seated constitutional ambiguity of the locus of sovereignty in Thailand's "Democratic Regime of Government with the King as Head of the State" so as to appeal to heaven for divine political intervention. This has inadvertently resulted in the increasing politicization of the monarchy and concomitant decline of royal hegemony as the symbolic ties between democracy and the monarchy in Thailand become unraveled. In this light, the latest coup by the NCPO military junta—on May 22, 2014—was a statist/bureaucratic politic attempt to salvage the cohesiveness of the Thai state apparatus in the face of the societally self-destructive, protracted political class conflict that has reached a stalemate and the aggravatingly vulnerable monarchy.

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* เกษียร เตชะพีระ, Faculty of Political Science, Thammasat University, 2 Prachan Road, Phra Nakorn, Bangkok 10200, Thailand
e-mail: kasian@tu.ac.th

I learned about the May 22, 2014 *coup d'état* by the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) under the leadership of the then commander-in-chief of the Royal Thai Army, General Prayut Chan-o-cha, the day it occurred. I was at a workshop comparing recent political developments and protests in Turkey and Thailand at the London School of Economics. The first thing that came to mind when I heard the news was a sentence I had come across long ago in my reading of Marx's writings on the state, in the preface to the second edition of his celebrated work on Louis Bonaparte's coup, dated 1869 (1974, 144):

I show how, on the contrary, the *class struggle* in France created circumstances and conditions which allowed a mediocre and grotesque individual to play the hero's role.

It struck me as an apt portrayal of the gist of the political crisis that had been plaguing Thailand for the past decade, namely, a mutually dissipating and destructive, protracted class conflict that had aggravatingly undermined its governing institutions and political civility, leading occasionally to partial state failures and anarchy in its administrative and business centers. With that class conflict reaching yet another impasse and stalemate in 2014, the NCPO's coup then presented itself as a statist or bureaucratic politic (*à la* Fred Riggs's Bureaucratic Polity in Riggs, 1966) solution to it in the *Bonapartist* manner.

However, from the time of the preceding Thai Bonaparte—Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, whose military absolutist rule lasted from 1958 to 1963—to the current one, much has changed in Thailand. Its population has more than doubled, from 28 million to 65 million; its GDP has increased 239-fold, from 54 billion to 12,910 billion baht; and its civil society has produced at least two successful popular uprisings, in 1973 and 1992, that managed to topple the military government of the day (Riggs 1966, 16; Pasuk and Baker 1995, 162; Baker and Pasuk 2005, xvii–xviii, 24, 201; Bank of Thailand 2015). Therefore, if the hugely corrupt and bullying womanizer of yesteryear who drank himself to death was still capable of producing some real tragedies, his latter-day sober and chaste if no less bullying aspirant seems more prone to making boastful, careless, farcical statements that have often landed his military administration in troubles both domestic and international (Thak 1979, 193–205; Grossman *et al.* 2009, 133; Anderson 2014, 52–53; Hookway 2015).¹⁾ He does indeed fit Marx's description of a *Bonapartist* hero insofar as

1) All in all, Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat used his usurped absolute power to order the summary execution of five suspected arsonists, five political dissidents/Communists, and one heroin producer, as well as the indefinite detention without trial of over 1,000 suspected Communists (Thak 1979, 193–205).

mediocrity and grotesqueness are concerned.²⁾

What I propose to do in this brief paper is to take a big picture and a long historical perspective of the current conflict and mass movements in Thailand, focusing on their class-related dimension, political dynamics, and royalist framing. Instead of focusing on the NCPO's coup *per se*, with its multifarious details and still ongoing eventuation, I would rather try to understand and assess it against the country's historical and cultural political backdrop.

Power Shifts in Modern Thai Political History

If one takes a long historical view of modern Thai politics since the late nineteenth century, one can't help but notice a recurrent pattern of major power shifts in modern Thai history. Its basic trajectory follows much the same logic:

- It begins with the partly pressured, partly voluntary opening up of the economy

2) In terms of mediocrity, with his limited grasp of the socioeconomic conditions of the country, Prime Minister General Prayut remarked in October 2014 that Thailand was a low-income country trying to acquire a middle-income status—when in fact Thailand already achieved lower-middle-income status about 40 years ago and is currently trying to escape the so-called middle-income trap (Felipe 2012, 16; Anon. 2014a). Early in 2015, he also said on the occasion of the Chinese New Year festival that the ancestors of the Thai people originally migrated from the Altai Mountain Range on the border of Russia about 3,000 years back, an outdated theory that was discarded from official Thai history textbooks almost 40 years ago (Anon. 2015c; 2015b). Initially, shortly after seizing power, he claimed that though he was a soldier, running the country was not difficult as the NCPO deployed the state apparatus and followed bureaucratic rules and regulations (Patshaya 2014). However, not long after assuming the premiership, he complained repeatedly of his resultant high blood pressure and desire to quit the political office (Wassana Nanuam's Facebook page, downloaded October 15, 2014). In terms of his grotesqueness, in one audience with the King prior to his rise to power, General Prayut was said to have lain still on the floor and let two of the King's favorite pet dogs lick his ears until they were wet all over. The King then commented that his dogs did so because they knew who was loyal to their master (Paisal Puechmongkol's Facebook page, downloaded January 21, 2015). Among the unusual things (not to say "unbecoming" of a PM) done in public by PM General Prayut so far are the following: in an interview with reporters, he almost unselfconsciously patted the head and tugged and fondled the left earlobe of a male assistant photographer kneeling beside him. While inspecting a trade fair for discounted goods at the Government House and being pestered by news reporters to pose for photographers, he ate a banana and then threw its peel at the reporters (Hookway 2015). His public statements and interviews were often peppered with controversial off-the-cuff remarks (such as suggesting that bikini-clad foreign female tourists might be unsafe on the beaches in Thailand in the wake of the killing of two British tourists, a remark for which he subsequently apologized), angry outbursts, bullying threats, and plenty of expletives (e.g., "damn you," "nuts," "lackeys," "so what?"), for which he lamely apologized afterward, saying that he was actually a "good-natured funny man" (Anon. 2015d).

Table 1 Three Major Power Shifts in Modern Thai History

International System	Economy	Society	Politics & Regime Change
Mid C/19–Early C/20 Colonialism	The country was opened up to the West and free trade regime	The rise of immigrant Chinese bourgeoisie & Western-style educated state bureaucrats	1932 revolution against absolute monarchy → constitutional regime
1960s–1970s Cold War	World Bank-advised, market-led, state-promoted economic development & Foreign Direct Investment	The rise of big bankers and urban middle class, esp. in Bangkok & provincial capitalists	Massrisings against military dictatorship in 1973 & 1992 → parliamentary democracy
1990s–the Present Post-Cold War & Great Recession	Economic Globalization & Financial Liberalization	The rise of globalized big capitalist groups & lower middle classes in the countryside and informal sector of the urban economy	The rise of Thaksin Shinawatra & the TRT party vs. “Democratic regime of government with the King as Head of the State” → ?

Sources: Saneh (1987; 1997); Anek (1993); Nidhi (1995); Anderson (2014).

- to the outside world, and the resultant rapid economic growth;
- That is followed by a big social change, especially the emergence and upward mobility of new social groups and classes in connection with the newly liberalized and expanding sector of the economy;
 - This leads to a political contest between the old elites and their privileged allies on the one hand, and the rising new groups and classes on the other;
 - Eventually, all this leads sooner or later to a regime change.

All in all, I reckon three such power shifts as laid out in Table 1.

A few general observations can be made on the dynamics of these power shifts. A power shift is a lengthy process, usually lasting more than a decade or so. It cannot be settled in one single political battle but involves a series of attacks and defenses, advances and retreats, cessations and resumptions of conflict, radical transformations and setbacks, reactions and compromises, both armed and unarmed, until it eventuates in a measure of regime change, i.e., an irreversible transformation of the *ancien régime* that nonetheless may not perfectly match the original objective of the new rising elite.

The rising groups and classes choose their preferred method of struggle for power on the basis of their particular available internal and external resources on the one hand, and the existing political circumstances on the other. Hence, as middle-ranking military officers and government officials under the absolute monarchy with no political rights and only limited civil liberties, members of the People’s Party had no alternative but to launch a coup to seize state power from King Rama VII in 1932. It was simply out of the question for them to set up a political party and run for an election, or to launch a public

campaign and agitate for a mass revolt (Pridi 2000, 125). The same is true in its own way with the student activists and leaders of the 1973 popular uprising against military dictatorship, with no possibility for electoral contest nor access to any part of the Thai Armed Forces at that time, but supported by the increasingly discontented and insecure emergent huge bourgeois strata (Anderson 2014, 50–62). In the current round of power shift, with ample money, a hitherto untapped lower middle class, a numerically superior electoral base, an extensive network of floating local electoral candidates and canvassers, under a relatively stable electoral democracy since 1992, a political party and an election were obviously the preferred vehicle and chosen method of power contest for a billionaire tycoon like Thaksin Shinawatra and his family and business friends—at least until his government was overthrown in a military coup in 2006 (Pasuk and Baker 2009).

The Irony of Class-Based Democratization

The above-mentioned series of power shifts also evinces a peculiar, ironic logic of class-based democratization as follows (see Table 2 below):

- The dominant former democratizers, themselves having been beneficiaries of previous economic reform and the subsequent power shift, initiate a new round of economic reform;
- That reform willy-nilly benefits and brings forth new social groups/classes that grow and evolve into new latter-day democratizers vis-à-vis their begetting predecessors,
- who in turn become diehard opponents of further democratization.

The emergence of the Thai lower middle class was first broached in the context of the unprecedented successive electoral victories of Thaksin and his Thai Rak Thai Party (TRT, meaning “Thais Love Thais”) as well as the rise of the anti-coup Red Shirt movement, on account of fundamental socioeconomic and political changes in the countryside

Table 2 The Ironic Logic of Class-Based Democratization in Thailand

Power Shifts	Old Anti-Democracy Power Holders	New Pro-Democracy Power Contenders
1932 Constitutionalist Revolution	Royalty and aristocrats	Bureaucratic elites
October 14, 1973–May 1992	Bureaucratic elites	Urban bourgeoisie
2005–the present	Urban bourgeoisie	Lower middle classes

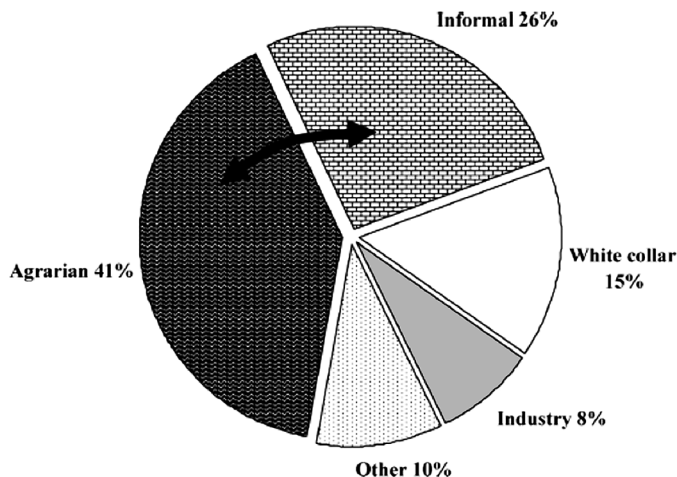


Fig. 1 Distribution of Labor Force, 2004

Source: Pasuk and Baker (2008, 71).

nationwide and, more specifically, of the rapid expansion of the informal sector of the economy in both the urban and rural areas in the past decade or so, by such scholars as Pasuk Phongpaichit, Chris Baker, Nidhi Aeusrivongse, and Attachak Satayanurak. It was Nidhi Aeusrivongse who first designated this key majority mass base as the lower middle class, on the basis of the definition of the middle classes around the world used by Abhijit V. Banerjee and Esther Duflo (Banerjee and Duflo 2008; Nidhi 2009, 162–167). Meanwhile, Pasuk and Baker proceeded to give the first graphic representation of this emergent majority-voter group in Thai society in a scholarly publication (Pasuk and Baker 2008, 71). Variouslly dubbed “cosmopolitan villagers” (Keyes 2012), “urbanized villagers” (Naruemon and McCargo 2011), “political peasants” (Walker 2012), and the “new middle class” (Attachak 2014), they became the subject of the most comprehensive, multifaceted, and thorough research so far by a team of multidisciplinary Thai academic researchers led by Apichat Satitniramai, Yukti Mukdawijitra, and Niti Pawakapan. The researchers collectively presented a vivid and concrete portrayal of the lower middle class’s socio-economic rise, cultural sentiments, and political viewpoints, as against those of their well-established counterparts (Fig. 1) (Naruemon and McCargo 2011; Keyes 2012; Walker 2012; Apichat *et al.* 2013; Attachak 2014).

Hence the irony of waves or cycles of democratization in Thailand, and probably in other semi-peripheral democracies as well.

In addition, it so happened that during the current third wave of democratization in Thailand’s history, the country’s further opening up to the globalized economy took place

early in the post-Cold War world, where Marxism-Communism was passé and liberal democracy reigned unchallenged as the universal currency of political legitimacy at the “end of history” à la Francis Fukuyama (1989).

Thus, it should come as no surprise that both the old and new middle-class contestants for power in Thailand drew from this common repertoire of political ideology, each selecting and stressing those elements and components of liberal democracy best suited to their own respective resources and interests.

The upshot is the coming apart of liberalism and democracy at their seams, with the old, established Thai middle class adopting a liberalizing discourse and rhetorical posture against elected politicians and majority rule, and the new, emergent Thai middle class taking a democratizing stance against the unelected elite and non-majoritarian institutions, pretty much as discerned by Fareed Zakaria in his article about the rise of illiberal democracy in many post-authoritarian and post-Communist countries (1997), and by the late Peter Mair in his article about the rise of “democracy without a demos” in Western democracies (2006) in the post-Cold War world.

Nidhi Aeusrivongse, a prominent historian and the foremost public intellectual in the country, succinctly sums up the differences between the Red-Shirt illiberal democratizers and the Yellow-Shirt undemocratic liberalizers (2015; see also Norton 2012):

The current political division in Thailand is a result of extreme differences of opinion concerning the political future of Thai society (at least as alleged by both sides).

One side dreams of a more democratic future of the country. The voice of the people will be the definite ruling, made known through a political process free of any outside intervention. In order to achieve this, Thai society needs to be made more equal, not only politically, but also in other ways.

Meanwhile, the other side dreams of a corruption-free future of the country, with knowledgeable, capable and honest government and leaders to lead Thailand to an all-round affluence. Inequality is not a big issue, especially in view of the fact that political equality in and of itself could even stand in the way of getting good and able people to fill the administrative positions.

In the eyes of the two conflicting sides, differences of opinion in these issues are no trivial matters. Many claim they are willing to sacrifice their lives or personal liberties to achieve these disparate political and social objectives.

Having laid out the macro-political economic dynamics of the process of power shifts in modern Thailand, I proceed to discuss next the cultural-political opportunity structure and grammar of royalist mass politics since the constitutionalist revolution of 1932 and how it has been played out amid the decline of royal hegemony in recent years.

Royal Hegemony

The King is the key to understanding royalist mass politics in Thailand. The two greatest political achievements during the reign of King Bhumibol (since 1946) are royal hegemony and what is called “the Democratic Regime of Government with the King as Head of the State.”

Royal hegemony, in the Gramscian sense of consensual leadership and non-coercive compliance, is the monarchy’s cultural-political solution to the historic problem at the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932, i.e., how best to manage the loss of sovereignty to commoner strangers/outsideers so as to preserve the vital interests and values of the palace and the nation (Williams 1985; McCargo 2005; Kasian 2011, 3–4).

For instance, King Prajadhipok (Rama VII) had designated confiscation of private property and abolition of royal titles (*rib sap kab thod jao*) as forbidden policy areas in the first audience granted to leaders of the 1932 revolution on June 30, i.e., six days after the revolution (Mahithon 2002; Kasian 2011, 5–8).

Royal hegemony, gradually and painstakingly built up by King Bhumibol since the 1950s, has three main components: (1) the royal-nationalist ideology that conceptually identifies the essence of the imagined national community of Thailand with the monarchy; (2) thousands of royal initiative development projects that concretely and visibly exemplify the King’s untiring, self-sacrificing, and innovative work to improve the well-being of the Thai people, particularly the rural poor; and (3) the monarchical network that informally and hierarchically links together loyal and trustworthy subjects in all walks of life throughout the country in the service of their Majesties the King and Queen, especially in times of crisis (Thongchai 2001; McCargo 2005; Chanida 2007).

First becoming manifestly effective in the palace-supported popular uprising against military dictatorship in 1973, royal hegemony managed to quell or hegemonize the three traditional threats to the monarchy evident in both Thailand and other kingdoms: (1) the military, whose top commanders solemnly proclaim themselves “His Majesty the King’s soldiers”; (2) the armed Communist movement, which was politically vanquished and organizationally disbanded, and whose remnants have turned lately into “the People’s Liberation Army of Thailand—Royal Guards”; and (3) the established middle class, many of whose members proudly and publicly display the popular self-designating logo “the King’s people” on their cars’ rear windows and personal T-shirts on the streets of Bangkok (Anon. 2012b; 2013; Thongthai 2012).

Arguably, in his heyday King Bhumibol became much more powerful in an informal, extra-constitutional sense than some of his absolute predecessors.

The Democratic Regime of Government with the King as Head of the State

On the basis of royal hegemony, the post-1973 form of government in Thailand became officially designated as “the Democratic Regime of Government with the King as Head of the State” in the preamble of the 1978 Constitution, in which the righteous King is ideationally positioned above the dirty, corrupt, competitive, partisan politics, alongside and in symbiotic relationship with the Thai people, as embodying the essence of Thainess (Thai Parliament 1978; Thongchai 2008, 19–23).³⁾

King Bhumibol was quoted as saying sometime in the late 1970s or early 1980s by the then caretaker secretary to the Privy Council, M. R. Thongnoi Thongyai, that the only occasion when the monarchy and its network would stoop to full involvement in politics was a political vacuum like the 1973 popular uprising against military dictatorship, when the military government of Field Marshal Thanom Kittikhachon stepped down and the National Legislative Assembly stopped functioning and was subsequently dissolved. However, once the vacuum was filled, the network monarchy needed to revert to its usual above-politics position as soon as possible, so as to be well prepared for the next such occasion (Nakharin 2006: 165, 183n66, 186–187n93).

Thai democracy and the Thai monarchy are thus conditional upon each other, forming an integral whole in which the former is unimaginable without the latter. Hence, democracy is made politically safe and tamed for the monarchy, unlike in the constitutional revolution of 1932 or in the surge of radical left-wing popular movements of 1975–76.

A key structural symptom of this political symbiosis is one provision that has typically appeared in almost all Thai constitutions except the very first one after the 1932 constitutionalist revolution, which specifies the following:

3) The evolution of this established epithet of the official political regime of the Kingdom of Thailand is intriguing in and of itself. Actually, it appeared for the first time in the aftermath of the royalist coup of 1947 against the ruling Pridi group, in Section 2 of the 1949 Constitution, but in a slightly different form, i.e., “Thailand has a democratic regime of government, and has the King as Head of the State” (Thai Parliament 1949). The two originally separate parts of the sentence became grammatically conjoined together and thereby politically conditional upon each other in the present form only with the return of the political clout of the monarchy following the 1973 popular uprising against military dictatorship in the preamble of the 1978 Constitution (Thai Parliament 1978). The resulting standard phrase (“the Democratic Regime of Government with the King as Head of the State”) has subsequently been incorporated into Section 2 of every constitution of the country since 1991 (Thai Parliament 1991).

Section 3.

The sovereign power belongs to the Thai people. The King as Head of the State shall exercise such power through the National Assembly, the Council of Ministers and the Courts in accordance with the provisions of this Constitution. (Thai Parliament 2007)

This key provision has always left unanswered the question of where sovereign power eventually lies: with the Thai people or with the King. A rather extremist, opportunist interpretation of this constitutional ambiguity is made by Professor Borwornsak Uwanno, a prominent French-educated royalist constitutional lawyer and the head of the first and now defunct Constitution Drafting Committee established by the NCPO. He has put forward the peculiar argument that, based on the said phrase, the people and the King have been co-holders of sovereign power in the Thai democratic regime since 1932. In the event of a military coup, sovereign power is taken away from the people and therefore, as a matter of principle, reverts back to the monarchy, its pre-1932 original owner. Once a new constitution is promulgated by the King, the people and the King become co-holders of sovereign power again (Borwornsak 1994, 189–190). It is worth pointing out that, according to this fantastic interpretation, at no point in time during Thailand's Democratic Regime of Government with the King as Head of the State have the Thai people held sovereign power by themselves alone. They have sovereign power in their hands at all only when they hold it together with the King, as permanently stunted minors under perennial royal tutelage.

I would argue that at the heart of the Thai political malaise is this deep and persistent ambiguity about the locus of sovereignty inherent in the Democratic Regime of Government with the King as Head of the State. It is this wondrous ambiguity that provides a long-standing cultural opportunity structure for such political adventures as the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD, 2006–13) and the People's Committee for Absolute Democracy with the King as Head of State (PDRC, late 2013–May 2014) as well as the NCPO coup.

Thaksin's Populist Capitalist Alternative Hegemony

The rise of Thaksin and his TRT party (including his network, nominees, and party avatars), which has won four consecutive valid national elections since 2001 (in 2001, 2005, 2007, and 2011), represents an alternative election-based nationwide hegemony on the platform of populist policy, neoliberal economy, and one-party dominant system (Kasian 2006; Pasuk and Baker 2009).

This unprecedented challenge to royal hegemony led subsequently to a reactive

excessive and widespread use and abuse of the monarchy and the *lèse-majesté* law for political purposes, especially against the democratically elected government of Thaksin and the TRT party as well as opponents of the military and royalist political forces (Streckfuss 2012; Anon. 2015a).

The political toll is telling: in less than a decade, four elected PMs—Thaksin Shinawatra, Samak Sundaravej, Somchai Wongsawat, and Yingluck Shinawatra—have been deposed by the iron triangle of the armed forces, senior judges, and royal-nationalist mass movements, the latter three in a string of judicial coups by the military-reorganized Constitutional Court. Meanwhile, the trial of *lèse-majesté* cases went up exponentially from around 30 per annum before the 2006 coup to nearly 500 in 2010. All these events are cheered on by people who proclaim themselves loyal subjects of the King.

The upshot is a waning royal hegemony, and a political repositioning of the network monarchy away from democracy and elections toward military rule and coups, that is detrimental to the long-term security of the monarchy itself.

Royalist Mass Movements

Be it the PAD, the short-lived Protect Siam Organisation (2012), or the recent PDRC, these and other minor royal-nationalist movements all share a basic political aim and modus operandi (Kasian 2006; 2009; Anon. 2012a; Thongchai 2013).

Essentially, they are not simply opposition movements, i.e., opposing the government of the day within a commonly recognized political system. Rather, they are resistance movements, i.e., aiming at overthrowing not only the government but the political system *in toto*.

This is because the democratic system of government that Thailand had as a result of the 1997 “political reform” constitution was vulnerable to the election-based, populist capitalist hegemony of Thaksin and his party, especially some of its components, such as the strengthened executive; the nationwide single-constituency party-list election that favored bigger, more affluent parties; and the effective subjugation of the centralized bureaucracy to the elected government (Rangsan 2003).

Hence an urgent, life-and-death need to overhaul this system, readjust the relations of power among its main institutional components by shifting power away from the elected organs to the non-majoritarian ones, installing some powerful checks-and-balances mechanisms, loosening the elected government’s hold over the bureaucracy, etc., so as to again make democracy safe for the network monarchy and royal hegemony. This is evident in the PAD’s and the PDRC’s political reform proposals (Anon. 2008; 2014b).

And since the military-drafted constitution of 2007, which clipped the wings of the democratically elected executive and legislature, still failed to prevent the continuing electoral victories and political comeback of Thaksin's ruling party and nominees as PMs (including Miss Yingluck, his youngest sister) time and again, the royal-nationalist resistance movement decided to strike again in order to further constrict the then existing democratic space under the slogan "reform before election" (Online Reporters 2013).

But how did it go about doing that? The *modus operandi* was to follow the proven successful formula of the October 14, 1973 uprising, namely, to artificially engineer a political vacuum and then use it as a pretext to invite "divine intervention." Only what was to be overthrown this time was not a *bona fide* military dictatorship but a democratically elected if allegedly corrupt government, and the way to accomplish it was not to hold a new general election and let the people decide, but to persistently disrupt one so as to silence and marginalize the voters and let the good, old, upright, and patriotic elites dictate to the nation.

Normally speaking, that might sound far-fetched and well-nigh impossible, but that was precisely the point: to exploit a crisis that presented itself as a rare window of opportunity so as to make the politically impossible become politically inevitable.

Thus, a political crisis provoked by the fatal miscalculation and mistake by the Yingluck government and the ruling Pheu Thai party in unceremoniously rushing through the House of Representatives a hugely unpopular and widely condemned, blanket amnesty bill that would have allowed Thaksin to return home a free and pardoned man provided a golden opportunity for Suthep Thaugsuban—a veteran shady politician from the South, former secretary-general of the opposition Democrat Party and one-time deputy prime minister responsible for the bloody suppression of the Red-Shirt demonstrators in Bangkok back in 2010—to launch an insurgent mass protest movement. The movement, centered mostly in the Democrat Party's strongholds in Bangkok and the South, was focused on ousting the Yingluck government and eradicating the Thaksin regime through "reform before election" since November 2013; at its height it allegedly numbered more than a million street protesters plus hundreds of hired armed thugs as protest guards (Eimer 2013; Li Li and Ming Dajun 2013).

During the six months of its continuing protest, the PDRC-led movement with Suthep as its secretary-general had forcefully occupied various key government offices and central business quarters in Bangkok; partly obstructed a general election; intermittently engaged in armed clashes with police and political opponents; and managed to paralyze the normal functioning of the Thai government, bureaucracy, electoral politics, and economy to a large extent, resulting in about 30 conflict-related deaths and over 800 wounded victims.

Maneuvering in tandem with/with the connivance of the Democrat Party, the army, various courts and constitutional independent bodies, etc., the PDRC managed to achieve the following political feats: the dissolution of the House of Representatives; the partial and temporary shutdown of the capital city of Bangkok; the boycott, disruption, and annulment of the February 2, 2014 general election; the legal protection of the PDRC demonstrations from suppression and dispersal by state authorities; the removal from office of caretaker PM Yingluck Shinawatra; and a general atmosphere of political vacuum, anarchy, and ungovernability in Bangkok.

What remained to be done was the usurpation of sovereign power by Suthep himself, the installation of an unelected PM and an unelected legislative People's Council, and the replacement of government by the people themselves with government for the people by the elite minority, with the 11th "final battle" of the PDRC declared by Suthep from the occupied Government House to be waged and won no later than May 26. Failing that, he announced, he would surrender himself to the police on May 27 (Anon. n.d.; Ratnikas n.d.).

Luckily, he was saved just in time by the NCPO's coup on May 22, which put an end to the engineered chaos, anarchy, and partial state failure and restored military-bureaucratic state power and security.

Conclusion: The NCPO's *Coup d'État*

The NCPO coup, which was the 13th of its kind in Thailand since the constitutionalist revolution of 1932, had as its declared aim the restoration of peace and order to the country, ravaged by a decade-long political conflict that at its worst threatened to degenerate into an open civil war. However, it seemed more like a stopgap or a pain reliever, carried out by those who held on to a questionable presumption that a centralized statist/bureaucratic politic regime of the postwar world could still resolve fierce and unrelenting class conflict in an increasingly globalized, cosmopolitan, politicized, and dehegemonized Thailand.

Based on their actual performance during the past two years, the NCPO and the Prayut government arguably set out to alter the preexisting mode of political participation under the so-called Democratic Regime of Government with the King as Head of the State in the following manner (Jayasuriya and Rodan 2007):

- making use of coercion under martial law, *lèse-majesté* law, and other security legislation to create a permanent state of depoliticized exception (*à la* Giorgio

Agamben) as a way to control and regulate ongoing class conflict (Agamben 2005, 1–31);

- installing a retro-semi-democracy under the tutelage of royal-nationalist and hyper-moralist, non-majoritarian institutions (i.e., “Ammat” forces, namely, the military, the privy council, the judiciary) over and above the majority voter among the population and their elected representatives;
- readjustment of the military-monarchy security partnership in the transition to the post-Bhumibol scenario of declining royal hegemony and hence the need for enhanced state coercion and military intervention in politics;
- further enhancement of state power over society in general, and the grassroots movements in particular, for the purpose of accumulation of capital by dispossession (*à la* David Harvey) and development of new capitalist frontiers (Harvey 2005, 137–182).

In that sense, it is a sequel to the 2006 antecedent albeit an overhauled and newly strategized one. The 2006 coup is regarded as *sia khong* (lost opportunity) insofar as the non-majoritarian bureaucratic institutions entered into an alliance with the right-wing royalist social forces in which the latter dominated politically. The result was the bloody crackdown of 2010, which eventually failed to suppress the oppositional forces and even led to their eventual electoral triumph in 2011. Therefore, this time around, the NCPO tried to distance itself from its erstwhile allies and stay properly “neutral” while taking full and direct control of political leadership and governmental power.

The NCPO’s chance of success in this endeavor depends on its ability to overcome its own manifold limitations, which include the following:

- its reliance on the over-centralized but under-unified and hence structurally inefficient bureaucratic state apparatus;
- its aspiration for unaccountable absolutist/arbitrary power and control coupled with its insoluble lack of political legitimacy, and hence increasing reliance on force and coercion that in turn will most likely generate administrative over-extension, stronger reaction, and wider opposition;
- its Cold War mentality, anti-terrorist tactics and strategy, and psychological warfare propaganda campaign;
- its conservative/reactionary, paternalistic, royal-nationalist ideology and culture.

So far, the NCPO in general and its head-cum-PM General Prayut Chan-o-cha in particular have proven themselves to be rather blind and blinkered prisoners of these

limitations, extolling their virtues and necessity instead of becoming aware of their inadequacies. The political future of the NCPO and the Thai military looks rather bleak.

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