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Thailand's Long Road to Democracy

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The sight of thousands of protesters on Bangkok's streets from June 2020, demanding that another government be brought down is nothing new. After all, since the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) donned yellow shirts and demonstrated against Thaksin Shinawatra's government in 2005, leading to the 2006 military coup, there have been several groups on the streets, often drawing thousands of supporters. Most recently, it was the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) that paved the way for the 2014 coup. Yet, the current protests have several new and distinguishing features, including an assessment that the monarchy is an impediment to democratization.

This article seeks to show what is distinctive about this latest movement and to compare it with previous democracy movements in Thailand. It also explains reasons why the monarchy is identified as anti-democratic.

Protests, old and new

Larry Diamond has recently observed that “[t]he last quarter of the twentieth century witnessed the most dramatic expansion of democracy in the history of the world.”¹ Thailand had been part of that expansion. Since 2006, however, Thailand's democratic progress has been undone. Despite their names and the support of the country's middle classes, the PAD and PDRC were anti-democratic. Both groups promoted political regression by undermining elected governments, declaring their loyalty to the monarchy, and making demands for authoritarian politics. These movements laid the groundwork for two periods of military rule.

The result of these interventions has indeed been authoritarianism. For example, in the five years following the 2014 coup, the military junta drafted laws and rules that prepared for 20 years of military-dominated administration. It did this while allocating increased political and economic power to the monarchy. With anti-junta movements quickly snuffed out, the judiciary wielded as political weapon against opponents, and hundreds jailed or facing charges like *lèse majesté*, sedition and computer crimes, authoritarian politics seemed almost

¹ Larry Diamond, “Democratic regression in comparative perspective: scope, methods, and causes,” *Democratization*, 2020, DOI: 10.1080/13510347.2020.1807517.

indestructible. This descent into autocracy was made all the more resilient by the widespread international backsliding on democratic politics.

In demanding democratic reform, the demonstrators of 2020 mark themselves as quite different from PAD and PDRC. While acknowledging the red shirt's sacrifices for democratization, today's demonstrators are generationally distinct from the red shirts and have moved beyond Thaksin's politics.² The most recent protests have been massive and peaceful, demanding the resignation of the Prime Minister, General Prayuth Chan-ocha, a new constitution, an end to political repression, and reforms to the monarchy and military. In short, they want a political system that is more democratic and less repressive.

The current movement exhibit several characteristics that distinguish it from previous movements. First, it is university and high school students who are in the vanguard. Students led the first effort for democratic reform in 1973, rising against a military regime.³ Yet it has been almost 50 years since students led the calls for democracy. The current demonstrators acknowledge the events of 1973 and the vicious 1976 rollback when military-aligned right-wing vigilantes supporting the monarchy murdered students at Thammasat University. In the current iteration, rallies have been held at dozens of universities and schools, with uniformed high school students making thoughtful and impassioned speeches to crowds of thousands. Some of their symbols of revolt against oppressive school regulations – such as white ribbons – have become symbols of the wider protests.

Second, the current uprising is the first that is technology driven and networked, with protesters called together at short notice using smart phone apps. News and vision of the rallies is also circulated on social media platforms. Phones have even become elements of rallies as support is shown by the mass use of phone flashlights. While earlier uprisings have mainly been Bangkok-based, smartphones have allowed the rallies to be nationwide events. Smartphones mean that rallies can be called, and locations changed, at short notice, bamboozling the authorities. The result is “flash mobs,” but on a larger scale than that term implies. The May 1992 uprising, where the military and police killing and injuring hundreds, was sometimes called the “mobile phone mob,” but this drew attention to support from Bangkok's middle class rather than the use of technology.⁴

Third, drawing comparisons with protests in Hong Kong, the current movement lacks a centralized structure; it is “leaderless,” politically innovative, inclusive, and spatially dispersed.⁵ Several high-profile speakers and activists became centers of attention in July and August, but were soon arrested and had long detentions. However, others soon took their places and even larger rallies resulted, each throwing up new “leaders” as speakers. The rallies have been remarkably inventive, with multi-centered but well-disciplined rallies that featured costumes, entertainers and artists, as well as a diversity of speakers. The manipulation of royal and state symbolism, the use of protest memes, and the use of earlier sites of pro-democracy rebellion – including the

² The red shirts also demanded elections and democratic reform, but their demands were snuffed out by military repression, first in 2010 and again after the 2014 coup – see several contributions to Michael J. Montesano, Terence Chong, and Mark Heng (eds), *After the Coup. The National Council for Peace and Order Era and the Future of Thailand*, Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019.

³ Ruth-Inge Heinze, “Ten Days in October -- Students vs. the Military: An Account of the Student Uprising in Thailand,” *Asian Survey*, 14 (6), 1974, pp. 491–508.

⁴ See David Murray, *Angels and Devils*, Bangkok: White Orchid Press, 1996, p. 141; Philip Shenon, “The 'Mobile Phone Mob' Faces Guns and Tanks,” *The New York Times*, May 24, 1992.

⁵ Ruji Auethavornpipat, “Thailand's protests and preventing a 'second 6 October',” *New Mandala*, November 2, 2020, accessed November 2, 2020, <https://www.newmandala.org/thailands-protests-and-preventing-a-second-6-october/>; on Hong Kong, see Tin-yuet Ting, “From ‘be water’ to ‘be fire’: nascent smart mob and networked protests in Hong Kong,” *Social Movement Studies*, 19 (3), 2020, pp. 362–368.

Rajaprasong intersection where red shirts were shot down in 2010 – show that the young are “democracy historians.” The protest sites have included universities, schools, central city streets, urban transport hubs, and suburban malls in Bangkok. Similar patterns were seen in provincial towns and cities. From July 18 and October 10, it was reported that there were some 246 protest events in 62 provinces around the country.⁶ Demonstrators embraced difference, and while politics was the core of rallies, LGBTI symbols and actors have been highly visible.

Finally, and really marking the new generation of protesters as different from predecessors is their demand that the monarchy be brought under the constitution and that its political and economic power be wound back. Following the 2006 coup, anti-monarchism had expanded, including among red shirts, the regime’s political repression limited its expression.⁷ The recent demonstrations changed that, with their calls for monarchy reform now being widely discussed and debated. From the language and memes used, it is evident that part of the learning about the monarchy and its political role has come from Thai political exiles, many of whom fled the country following the 2014 coup. Indeed, in their August 10 listing of 10 demands of the monarchy, the students acknowledged the work of exiled monarchy critics, historian Somsak Jeamteerasakul and political scientist Pavin Chachavalpongpun.⁸

It is no coincidence that some of these “democracy historians” have chosen to call themselves “Khana Ratsadon 2563.” The original Khana Ratsadon, known in English as the People’s Party, overthrew Thailand’s absolute monarchy in 1932 and established constitutionalism.⁹ Adopting that name and appending the current year in the Buddhist calculation (2563=2020) is an adamant statement of adherence to the principles of the People’s Party: that the king be brought under the constitution, and that he cannot act independently without parliamentary approval.¹⁰

Previous democracy movements did not declare the monarchy an impediment to democratic reform, instead targeting the military. Why is it, after 88 years, today’s rebellious youth view the monarchy as the obstacle to democracy? Simply put, those calling for reform have determined that the monarchy represents a keystone of a tripartite alliance that has defeated democratization: monarchy, military, and big business. The protesters appear to believe that this triple alliance can only be undone if the monarchy is reformed. How did it come to this?

Monarchy vs. democracy

Today’s monarchy was largely (re-)invented during the second half of the 20th century. Forced to accept a constitution in 1932, the monarchy was stripped of its most significant political power and lost control of palace wealth. The reign of King Bhumibol, which began in 1946 and ended in 2016, witnessed a remarkable restoration

⁶ Tyrell Haberkorn, “The Fight for Democracy in Thailand,” *Dissent*, October 21, 2020, accessed October 21, 2020, https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/the-fight-for-democracy-in-thailand.

⁷ Anonymous, “Anti-Royalism in Thailand Since 2006: Ideological Shifts and Resistance,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 48 (3), 2018, pp. 363-394.

⁸ Prachatai, “Demonstration at Thammasat calling for reform on politics and monarchy,” *Prachatai*, August 13, 2020, accessed November 1, 2020, <https://prachatai.com/english/node/8717>.

⁹ See Federico Ferrara, *The Political Development of Modern Thailand*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, ch. 3.

¹⁰ “Announcement of the People’s Party No. 1 (1932),” in Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit (eds), *Pridi by Pridi. Selected Writings on Life, Politics, and Economy*, Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2000, pp. 70-72.

of both political authority and royal wealth. This restoration resulted from a political struggle by the palace that bore fruit in the late 1950s when Bhumibol developed a partnership with military coup leader Gen Sarit Thanarat.¹¹

The monarchy's relationship with the military has strengthened and deepened to a stage where the current military leadership considers "protecting" the monarchy as its principal duty. Bhumibol, remained suspicious of electoral politics, considered elected politicians "dangerous," treated constitutions with disdain, and regularly approved military coups.¹² As might be expected of a monarch, he was politically conservative and preferred a conservative polity. An incessant political meddler, Bhumibol favored "behind-the-scenes" manipulation, operating through trusted mediators and political schemers who made up the "network monarchy."¹³ By the end of the 20th century, the monarchy had regained and expanded its political authority. Related, constant, overbearing propaganda meant the throne's public prestige grew to a level not seen since the 19th century.

As the throne accumulated the capacity to influence and change political events, it also rebuilt its wealth. From claims of royal penury in the early 1950s, by 2005, the Crown Property Bureau – representing the bulk of the monarch's wealth – had amassed wealth valued between US\$27 and 40 billion.¹⁴ By 2019, this wealth may have expanded to as much as \$70 billion.¹⁵ This makes the Crown the largest conglomerate in the country, a position that has brought it into alliance with Thailand's big capitalists, involving business partnerships but also expressed in the ideological and political spheres. Thailand's biggest tycoons are regularly seen donating to the palace, building their prestige and that of the monarchy. At the same time, in the political battles between Thaksin supporters and royalist forces, many of the biggest business families threw their money and influence behind the conservatives and military.¹⁶ Under General Prayuth's regime, as the protesters have noticed, not only has his government received strong support from the largest business groups, but they have been significantly benefitted from state projects and contracts.

Knowing that previous democracy protesters have tried and failed to remove the military from politics, the new campaigners have decided that the keystone of the tripartite ruling alliance must be removed. Since Vajiralongkorn took the throne, he has demonstrated the power of the monarchy, his conservatism, and a desire to further expand the throne's political and economic power. That the king and military have an accommodation built around the military's capacity for repression and with Prayuth's government rolling back constitutional constraints on the monarchy, democratic reform appears even more urgent. That urgency is underlined by the struggle over the symbols of 1932. With Vajiralongkorn and the regime erasing memorials to 1932, Khana Ratsadon 2563 has attempted to use and revive them.¹⁷ Recognizing Vajiralongkorn's neo-traditionalism and his preference for royal

¹¹ Kevin Hewison, "Monarchy and Succession," in Pavin Chachavalpongpun (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Thailand*, London: Routledge, pp. 118-133.

¹² Kevin Hewison, "The Monarchy and Democratisation," in Kevin Hewison (ed.), *Political Change in Thailand. Democracy and Participation*, London: Routledge, 1997, pp. 58-74.

¹³ Duncan McCargo, "Network monarchy and legitimacy crises in Thailand," *The Pacific Review*, 18 (4), 2005, pp. 499-519.

¹⁴ Porphant Ouyyanont, "The Crown Property Bureau in Thailand and the crisis of 1997," *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 38 (1), 2008, p. 184.

¹⁵ Kevin Hewison, "Crazy Rich Thais: Thailand's Capitalist Class, 1980–2019," *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 51 (2), 2021, DOI: 10.1080/00472336.2019.1647942.

¹⁶ See Ilya Garger, "The Color of Money: Political Affiliations of Thai Business Families," Capital Profile Special Report, August 28, 2014.

¹⁷ On erasure, see Panu Wongcha-um and Panarat Thepgumpanat, "In Thailand, it's statues of democracy leaders that are disappearing," *Reuters*, June 24, 2020, accessed November 2, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-democracy->

absolutism, the protesters feel constitutionalism under threat.

The King's view of the protests is opaque. Despite a recent "interview" that had him mention "compromise," this is not a characteristic he has previously demonstrated. As a trained military officer, he demands obedience and he has shown a propensity for erratic and furious behavior.¹⁸ His several public meetings with ultra-royalists suggest that he views the protesters as a threat to the throne.

Until the recent protests, the maintenance of the monarchy's prestige has relied on the regime and military stamping out anti-monarchism. From 2014, the regime charged and jailed hundreds.¹⁹ More worrying, and an important stimulus for the emergence of the recent protests, some believe that the regime is also responsible for the enforced disappearance and murder of several exiled anti-monarchy activists.²⁰ Clearly, by challenging the King, the activists take on a powerful opponent.

Vajiralongkorn is economically powerful. Not only has he inherited his father's immense wealth, but he has made it his own, having both constitution and law changed to make the Crown's wealth his personal property. The royal family also receives more than US\$1 billion a year in taxpayer funding, to be spent on "protecting" and "revering" the royal family.²¹ Taxpayer funding maintains an extensive ideological apparatus that projects the King as the "father of the nation," responding to emergencies and "caring" for his people. Such promotion has been more difficult to sustain when the King spends most of his time living in Germany. Even so, vast resources are expended by scores of ministers and senior bureaucrats who must repeatedly demonstrate their loyalty to the monarchy.

In his still short reign, Vajiralongkorn has amassed considerable political clout. Revisions he demanded in the 2017 constitution – something the protesters have targeted – and the transfer of palace administration and thousands of police and military to Vajiralongkorn's personal control. Considerable effort has also gone into creating a quasi-military Royal Thai Volunteers, composed mostly of soldiers, bureaucrats and others who uphold the monarchy, who work to make the often absent King "present" and "connected" to his country.

The King's major alliance remains with the military leadership. Loyalty to the monarchy motivates the military leadership, with the top brass having made their careers through service to the throne.²² With more than 360,000 active and 200,000 reserve personnel, a 2019 budget of more than \$7.5 billion, and a penchant for shooting demonstrators, the military remains a dangerous defender of the status quo. Today, the military's leadership backs Prayuth's government in opposing students and others it identifies as anti-monarchists. With Vajiralongkorn having cemented his control over military promotions, he has also filled his palace with former high-ranking officers.²³ These moves have blurred the lines between palace, military, and regime.

monuments-idUSKBN23V024. For the protesters' response, see Tassanee Vejpongsa, "Thai protesters install plaque symbolizing democracy," *AP*, September 20, 2020, accessed November 2, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/bangkok-thailand-archive-democracy-f29b2b08490dce3f2716780eb4131bcf>.

¹⁸ Hewison, "Monarchy and Succession," pp. 125-127.

¹⁹ David Streckfuss, "Lèse-majesté within Thailand's regime of intimidation," in Pavin (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Thailand*, pp. 134-144.

²⁰ Hathairat Phaholtap and David Streckfuss, "The ten demands that shook Thailand," *New Mandala*, September 2, 2020, accessed November 3, 2020, <https://www.newmandala.org/the-ten-demands-that-shook-thailand/>.

²¹ "Thanathorn wants more transparency in annual budget for monarchy," *The Nation*, September 6, 2020, accessed November 3, 2020, <https://www.nationthailand.com/news/30394107>.

²² Paul Chambers and Napisa Waitoolkiat, "The Resilience of Monarchised Military in Thailand," *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 46 (3), 2016, pp. 425-444.

²³ Paul Chambers, "Red rim soldiers: the changing leadership of Thailand's military in 2020," *New Mandala*, September 21, 2020,

One of the major efforts by the Prayuth regime to shore up its political control and to defeat anti-monarchism has involved internal psychological warfare using the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC). Credited with “defeating” the red shirts after 2010, ISOC links the military and civilian administration making it “a potent tool with which conservative elites can undermine and control electoral democracy and through which the military can maintain its power.”²⁴ Its well-funded operations run in parallel with civilian agencies and most notably with the powerful Ministry of Interior, with a network of agents and officials throughout the country. Its activities include surveillance that extends to the community level and online, developing, funding and mobilizing right-wing groups, the harassment and detention of political opponents and the disruption of their activities. Today, all state agencies must abide by ISOC’s plans and work with ISOC supervision, making it a powerful and dangerous opponent for the pro-democracy students.²⁵

Concluding comments

The struggle for democratic reform in Thailand has extended over nine decades. Democratic expansion has always seen an authoritarian reaction and democratic rollback. The fight continues, with the outcome uncertain. The current protesters have emphasized the monarchy and military in authoritarian alliance, with the attention to the monarchy unprecedented. More than 20 years ago, in criticizing the then monarch’s opposition to democratization, I pointed out that “[a] developed constitutional system can protect a weak or unpopular monarch.” Vajiralongkorn seems less interested than his father and as then, “this may well prove to be to the detriment of the dynasty and the institution.”²⁶ ■

accessed November 3, 2020, <https://www.newmandala.org/the-changing-leadership-of-thailands-military-in-2020/>.

²⁴ Puangthong Pawakapan, *The Central Role of Thailand's Internal Security Operations Command in the Post-Counter-insurgency Period*, Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute TRS17/17, 2017, p. 1.

²⁵ Puangthong, *The Central Role*, pp. 25-26.

²⁶ Hewison, “The Monarchy and Democratisation,” p. 74.

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