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A Struggle for Democracy in Divided Thailand

Janjira Sombatpoonsiri

(Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University)

There are two Thailands. One is defined by the traditional streak that regards the monarchy as the soul of the nation, and the other is characterized by democratic credentials that highlight the “people” as the priority. The clash between these two political orders is age-old, but the youth-led protests last year brought it to a new level. The battleground is both on the streets and on screen.

Polarization-cum-autocratization

Thailand’s polarization is underpinned by elite power struggle and bifurcated populace mobilized to support two political orders: royal nationalism and democracy. The struggle dates back to the early 20th century when a group of young bureaucrats introduced the notion of popular sovereignty and replaced Thailand’s then absolute monarchy with constitutional monarchy. However, this democratic aspiration has been short-lived as the military-monarchy nexus resurged to dominate the country’s political landscape, setting the stage for endless military coups and repeated episodes of authoritarianism. In 1973, students-led movements precipitated a democratic breakthrough, only to be reversed in 1976. The spell of authoritarian rule was briefly broken in 1992, following a popular uprising that damaged the credibility of the military and introduced the 1997 constitution that is considered as the most democratic of its kind. Nonetheless, this change did little to challenge the royal nationalist ideology. Meanwhile, royalist elites occupied “reserve domains,” or bastions of nondemocratic political power, that allowed them to constrain an elected government’s control over the passage, implementation, and enforcement of its own policies.

This dominance of elite networks was challenged from 2001 onwards, setting the scene for democratic breakdown and polarization. The media tycoon-turned politician, Thaksin Shinawatra, founded the Thai Rak Thai Party (TRT) that won a landslide victory in the 2001 elections. This was

mainly because its platform responded to Thailand's socio-economic transformations which had been occurring since the 1980s, creating a new clientele for welfare-driven policies. For the economically marginalized population, these policies were seen as a source of not merely social mobility but also social dignity. TRT supporters based their ideational premise on a new sense of being Thai citizens granted with equal rights, rather than regarding them as subjects under royal tutelage. The royalist establishment, however, viewed this tendency as a threat. Not only did Thaksin's fast-growing popularity begin to rival that of the king but also TRT's efforts to promote social mobility challenged the hierarchical worldview of Thailand's establishment, which negates the notion of social equity. In defense of the old world, the palace, army, the courts and allied businesses coalesced to undermine new political forces, which resulted in hardening the anti-establishment sentiment.

This ideational conflict also prompted the shift from the elites' power struggle to the confrontation between popular supporters of the two political visions, plunging Thailand deep into a spiral of toxic polarization. While TRT supporters and pro-democracy activists formed the "red shirt" movement in countering what they deemed as an elite onslaught of electoral democracy, royalist nationalists rallied behind the pro-establishment "yellow shirt" movement to protect national pillars from what they considered as "parliamentarian tyranny." Red and yellow shirts engaged in the tit-for-tat disruptive demonstrations that at times brought Thailand to a standstill by ousting governments representing their respective antagonists in 2005, 2008, 2009-2010 and 2013-2014. Notably, the outcome of red shirts' street politics was often decided on the ballot which at times brought to power its favorable party. In contrast, yellow shirts' mass protests usually set the stage for a judicial intervention or military coup that sought to dismantle red shirts' power base. It is this relationship between antidemocratic institutional actors such as the Constitution Court and the armed forces, on the one hand, and mass movements, on the other, that broke down Thailand's democracy and set the country on an autocratic path in 2006 and between 2014 and 2019.

2020 Anti-establishment Movement: Drivers and Characteristics

Upon its seizure of power in 2014, the military promised to bring "happiness" to Thailand by restoring order and bringing about reconciliation. Behind the rhetoric, however, was the frantic suppression of dissent and the rearrangement of power dynamics that would concentrate wealth and power to the elites and their allies. Over the course of five-year military rule, cases of human rights violation skyrocketed; corruption and abuse of power were rampant; governance was poor; and

income gap between the rich and the poor was unprecedentedly widened. Despite growing criticisms, the regime frequently sustained its rule partly by claiming that its various policies were to defend the imperiled monarchy. As the latter's political capital remains high in Thai society, this excuse has worked effectively to attract public support and deter the opposition—that is until it has ultimately reached a certain point. The revolt from July to December 2020 signifies this turning point: a crisis of royal legitimacy.

Several factors drive the resurgent anti-establishment movement that morphed from the protest against the junta to public defiance of royal power. First, military rule has entrenched the unchecked power of the palace and related institutional actors at the expense of eroding the rule of law. In fact, laws have increasingly been weaponized to quell dissent, and the privileged elites have the ability to uphold their impunity. Second, this development—together with rising economic inequality—has generated widespread grievances and public discussions regarding the role of the monarchy in alleviating citizens' suffering. While the late King Bhumibhol carried the moral image of royal sacrifices for many Thais, such cannot always be the case in the current reign. This growing reluctance contributes to diluting systemic legitimacy of royal nationalism. Third, thanks to rapid economic and technological changes, Thailand's younger generation increasingly feels alienated from the old order that the junta represents. In contrast to the youngsters' socially progressive, politically democratic and culturally open-minded traits, the old guards promote traditional values, top-down rule and nationalism. Ongoing repression and dwindling freedom of expression suffocate the Thai youth. Meanwhile, inequality conducive to the lack of opportunities shapes the dimmed prospect among the youngsters that they will not have a bright future in Thailand. Protest slogans such as “it has to end in our generation” (*hai man chob tee run rao*) epitomizes this pessimism that if changes do not arrive soon, young people's future will be doomed.

Under these circumstances, two events triggered the 2020 mass mobilization. The first was the dissolution of the Future Forward Party (FFP). The FFP is a good example of a pro-democracy force that fell victim not only to Thailand's autocratic spell but also to enduring polarization. The party embodies the anti-establishment camp, but is considered to be more vocal than the TRT in terms of its democratic agenda. At times the royalists portray the FFP as advocating for republicanism. But for the younger generation, the FFP reminds them that a better future for Thailand is possible. As such the party attracted 6.3 million votes, out of around 53 million voters in the March 2019 election. Through the constitutional manipulation, the military-backed Palang Pracharat Party (PPP) gained the majority of votes, thus currently leading the ruling coalition. Despite this, the establishment and its supporters feel increasingly threatened by the youthful force

the FFP has unleashed. In February 2020, the Constitutional Court disbanded the FFP for obscure reasons, sparking initial student protests across more than 50 university campuses and schools.

The second trigger event was the forced disappearance of an exile activist, Wanchalerm Saksatsit, in July 2020. Wanchalerm sought refuge in Cambodia after the 2014 putsch. His anti-establishment activism included online criticisms of the junta and the palace, which led many to suspect a high profile involvement in his disappearance. Soon after the news broke out, social media campaigns called to #abolish112 (the 112 Article being the law punishing offenses of the monarchy). Small gatherings calling for the investigation into the Wanchalerm case escalated into a larger political movement that later demanded not only the resignation of General Prayuth Chan-ocha, the 2014 coup leader and current Prime Minister, but also a democratic amendment to the constitution, especially the abolition of the unelected senate, as well as the reform of deeply politicized monarchy in line with constitutional monarchy. As of December 2020, there have been almost 500 protest events organized across Thailand.

Key characteristics of the protests are threefold. First, in terms of organization, these are “networked protests” based on loose coordination between different organizations. Initially led by university students, scattered protests subsequently evolved into the broad-based movement, known as *Khana Ratsadorn* (People’s Party), comprising for instance high school and university student clubs, labor unions, artists and LGBTQI movements. While sharing the aforementioned goals and co-organizing major protest events, members of the *Khana Ratsadorn* remained autonomous in holding their own protests at convenient sites and addressing specific grievances. Second, social media has played a vital role in the mobilization. Particularly Twitter hashtags have been created to publicize protest events (e.g. #TagYourFriendsToJoinMob) and fundraise; galvanize ideas for ‘hip’ and ‘cool’ protest activities (e.g. #IdeasForMob); mobilize crowds to the police station or the court in the face of arbitrary arrest of activists; and draw international attention to the protests (e.g. #WhatsInHappeningInThailand). Lastly, witty slogans and the use of urban pop culture distinguish the style of ongoing protests from previous pro- and anti-establishment demonstrations. Protesters’ self-made banners are satirical critiques of ruling elites. Many events were inspired by, for example, a popular Japanese manga, the fiction-turned film *Harry Potter* and a Thai comedy film. Through these novel protests, many onlookers and international media paid attention to protesters’ demands.

“The Elephant in the Room” and Politicized Polarization

By resisting autocracy, protesters addressed the “elephant in the room,” which is the place of the monarchy in democratic politics. This bold move can be traced back to a string digital dissent that

sent shockwaves due to its transgression of the taboo. In 2019, Twitter users criticized royal privileges in events such as a road blockade by the royal motorcade (e.g. # RoyalMotorcade) and the shutdown of an island due to a royal visit (e.g. #IslandsShutdown). However, amidst the first wave of student protests in early 2020, the most controversial and viral Twitter hashtag was #whydoweneedaking?, which was repeated 1.2 million times in 24 hours, and trended on Twitter on March 22, 2020. Taking things up a notch, a prominent dissent and exile launched the Facebook Page ironically dubbed “Royalist Marketplace” in which gossips and scandalous images of the royal family were shared among millions of page members. This style of hashtags and online “gossip” continued in offline protests in the form of self-made protest banners that mocked the royal lifestyle outside Thailand, royal discourses, the cultural façade of Thai loyalty to the monarchy, and many other royalist practices. This pushing of the cultural boundary reached the peak in early August when a leading activist delivered a speech demanding a democratic reform of the monarchy. The event was a breakthrough for it inspired protest speeches that openly discussed royal power in Thai politics, a traditionally taboo subject that could potentially place offenders in jail for 15 years or more.

While public discussions regarding the monarchy are needed for Thailand’s democratic resurgence, what is deemed as popular contempt toward the sacred institution has provoked reactions from both the elite establishment and royalist citizens, thereby inevitably opening old wounds of polarization. For a long while, royalist groups such as the Rubbish Collection Organization allegedly monitored, reported and at times harassed offenders of the monarchy. In the face of the 2020 revolt, pro-establishment groups diversified their tactics by engaging in online disinformation campaigns. Ultimately the battleground is Twitter where the Thai elites struggle to censor criticisms of the monarchy. In September 2020, hashtags as well as posts favorable to the establishment and unfavorable to protesters were generated and retweeted. According to an expert investigation, tens and thousands of these accounts were inauthentic, behaving like bots. However, many royalists claimed that their accounts were genuine and they were the “silent power.” Regardless of being created by bots or humans, royalist hashtags such as #WeLoveTheMonarchy gained traction and became Twitter trending superseding anti-establishment hashtags on October 20, 2020. A nascent digital royalist group called “Youngsters Love the Monarchy” (*Anuchon rak sathaban kasat*) went so far as to organize an online training for royalist Twitter users to improve their hashtagging skills. In parallel with this online contestation, pro-establishment supporters took to the streets and in a few incidents clashed with anti-establishment protesters. There were concerns that the apparently acute conflict between the two sides would again pave the way for military

intervention.

Here is the paradox for Thailand’s ongoing struggle for democracy that reflects the complex relationship between polarization and autocratization. By openly addressing the royal power—a once taboo subject—the anti-establishment movement has explicitly pointed to one of the root causes of Thailand’s entrenched autocracy which needs to be reformed for the sake of long-term democratization. Yet in doing so, the movement has also contributed to the further accumulation of royalist support for the palace due to the divisive and polarized nature of the issue. One can argue that hardcore royalist groups described above gained critical traction after protest speeches about the monarchy became more open and regular than before. But at the same time, avoiding open discussions on the royal power is counterproductive to democratic sustainability. Is there a way to address the “elephant in the room” without creating a chance for antidemocratic elites to politicize polarization? This could be a question awaiting all of us in 2021.■

- **Janjira Sombatpoonsiri** is currently a research-oriented assistant professor at the Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, and an associate at the German Institute for Global and Area Studies. Her research has focused on nonviolent activism and social movements in the context of democratization and autocratization, and recently digital repression.

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For inquiries:
Jinkyung Baek, Director of the Research Department

Tel. 82 2 2277 1683 (ext. 209) j.baek@eai.or.kr

The East Asia Institute
#909 Sampoong B/D, Eulji-ro 158, Jung-gu,
Seoul 04548, South Korea
Phone 82 2 2277 1683 Fax 82 2 2277 1697
Email eai@eai.or.kr Website www.eai.or.kr