



Malaise Till Kingdom Come: Pro-Democracy Protests Push Thailand Into Uncharted Territory

A mass of university students giving the three-fingered *Hunger Games* salute. Calls for democracy and the end of authoritarian rule. A grassroots movement without a political party whose preferred organizing tools are social media groups and encrypted messenger applications. On first blush, these would appear to be the stylings and tactics of Hong Kong's ill-starred 2019 protest movement. However, the stage for this political confrontation sits more than 1,500 kilometers to the southwest, in the Kingdom of Thailand. In recent weeks, thousands of protesters—the vast majority students and young people—have taken to the streets to decry the continued political dominance of the country's military, and, in an unprecedented twist, to question the powers enjoyed by the Thai monarchy.

Thailand, an upper middle-income nation of nearly 70 million people, is no stranger to political unrest, having experienced thirteen successful and nine unsuccessful putsches in a little over a century (though precise counts vary). The intermittent windows of civilian government between long periods of military rule have often proved short-lived and unstable. Since the establishment of modern Thailand in 1932, the country has had 21 state constitutions, each having failed to offer a winning formula for enduring political stability. The most recent coup d'état, executed with surgical precision in April 2014, saw a junta dubbed the National Council for Peace and Order ("NCPO") come to power on the back of a long-simmering conflict between the Yellow Shirts, a Bangkok-centered pro-establishment movement, and the Red Shirts, a group composed of the allies of deposed former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra. The political crisis of 2013 and 2014 centered on geographic and socioeconomic fault lines that appeared manageable for Thailand's generals. Their engineered solution, though unstated, focused on tipping the electoral scales away from Thaksin and his Red Shirt movement.

The ongoing pro-democracy protests are of an altogether different nature than those that spawned Thailand's last political crisis, however. Absent the specter of the exiled Thaksin, the current grassroots movement is blurring old political lines in fundamental ways that pose a more troubling problem for Thailand's military, which remains in *de facto* control of the country despite its ostensible return to civilian rule in July 2019 following long-delayed elections. Across Thailand's turbulent modern history,

the military has served as one of two enduring wells of power, the other being its most sacrosanct institution: the monarchy. The ruling House of Chakri, which has held the throne since 1782, has existed largely above the political fray for most of Thailand's modern history. On occasion, it has also served as a critical mediator of last resort amid the vicissitudes of the country's politics. That it now finds itself in the crosshairs of a popular protest movement underscores the extent to which Thailand is moving into uncharted political territory.

Out of the Barracks and Never to Return?

In the wake of the 2014 coup d'état, Thailand's military sought to paper over the long-festered divisions that precipitated the political crisis of 2013-2014, primarily to the advantage of the establishment forces that undergirded the Yellow Shirt movement. However, unlike in other recent putsches, the military has not, in effect, returned to its barracks. Instead, it has sought to institutionalize its place within the government, ensuring that its political influence outlives the now-retired junta. A new military-drafted constitution that went into force in 2017 grants the military power to appoint the upper house of the country's legislature, among other political privileges.

In anticipation of the March 2019 election—the first held since the 2014 coup d'état—the military-backed Palang Pracharat Party (“PPP”) was formed. Although it placed second in last year's poll, the party succeeded in forming a coalition government led by former commander-in-chief of the Royal Thai Army (“RTA”) Prayut Chan-o-cha. Prayut, who led the NCPO from 2014 until its dissolution, has now recast himself as a civilian prime minister. His powerful deputy, Prawit Wongsuwan—himself a former RTA chief and senior leader of the NCPO—has also transitioned into the new civilian government and, in tandem, taken the helm of the PPP. Both men are veterans of the RTA's ‘Eastern Tigers’ faction, which has dominated the military establishment for decades and whose ranks serve as part of the Queen's Guard corps.

Deputy Prime Minister Prawit, often described as the *de facto* senior partner in the Prayut-Prawit dyad, has orchestrated a handful of recent personnel changes within the government cabinet, forcing out prominent technocrats, such as Dr. Somkid Jatusripitak. The resulting cabinet reshuffle announced in August underscores Prawit's command of an agenda that intertwines marquee economic initiatives, such as Thailand 4.0 and the Eastern Economic Corridor, with the military's traditional security priorities. While both initiatives are envisioned as key drivers of future growth, the government is under enormous pressure to create economic opportunities in the short-term. The kingdom recorded a 12.2% contraction in the second quarter, reflecting the damage wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic on an economy that is more than one-fifth dependent on tourism revenues. Thailand's status as one of the most unequal societies in the world—more than fifty percent of the kingdom's wealth is held by the top one percent—has thrown the economic downturn into even starker relief.

Perhaps of greater consequence has been the military's management of Thailand's first royal succession in almost eight decades following the 2016 death of King Bhumibol, who enjoyed near universal reverence in the kingdom. Fearful that Thailand's squabbling civilian politicians might bungle the succession (or politicize it for partisan ends), the military took matters into their own hands. Under the rule of the NCPO, the transfer of the throne to Bhumibol's son, Vajiralongkorn—a figure of some controversy who is less revered than his father—proceeded largely without complication, thus preserving the military's traditional source of legitimacy and discrete claim to political power: the safeguarding of Thailand's monarchy.

Back to the Future

While the military has largely succeeded in achieving its immediate aims, namely bestowing a democratic veneer on its power, this month's protests have underscored the existence of new political fault lines including a tug of war between pro-military and anti-military camps, both within the establishment and the public at large. Particularly pronounced are the generational characteristics

of this new divide, with Thailand's youth playing a leading role in powering opposition figures in last year's elections, most notably 41-year-old Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit of the Future Forward Party. The rhetorical threat posed by Thanathorn, the scion of a prominent auto parts conglomerate who advocated a reduction in the defense budget and constitutional changes that would reign in the military's powers, was formidable enough to warrant his banning from politics and the dissolution of the Future Forward Party in February 2020.

Prayut and Prawit—architects of Thailand's quasi-democratic new normal—have also found themselves under pressure from competing elements within the military. With the rise of King Vajiralongkorn, also styled Rama X, observers have witnessed the emergence of a rival and ascendant RTA faction led by current commander-in-chief Apirat Kongsompong, a vocal royalist hardliner who is perceived to enjoy the favor of the new king. The prospect of Apirat's term as army chief being extended during an anticipated military shuffle in September may check the influence of the 'Eastern Tigers' faction, whose position has deteriorated as the politically savvy king consolidates his position atop the monarchy's parallel power structure. While Prayut and Prawit still enjoy firm control over the nominally civilian government, including the primary economic portfolios, their political longevity—not to mention the prospect of a safe retirement from public life—may hinge on how the king chooses to employ the laws of chess governing elite politics in Thailand.

The Unthinkable Now Countenanced

The elite gamesmanship playing out behind the scenes has been complemented by an altogether different debate in the public square. Leveraging social media, government critics have amplified criticism of Thailand's ruling institutions in ways that would have been mostly unthinkable under the long reign of the late King Bhumibol. The Thai-language Twitter-verse has given birth to a number of incendiary hashtags in recent months—"Why do we need a king?" and "Daeng should prostrate before the feet of the Thai people," the latter in reference to Apirat—that take direct aim at Thailand's two most powerful institutions.

In recent weeks, opponents of the government and pro-democracy supporters have taken their criticism one step further by voicing such sentiments openly on the streets of Bangkok. The protests, so far peaceful, are in effect leaderless and composed in large part by university students several generations removed from the generals now exercising control over the kingdom. Their demands include holding new elections, ending the intimidation of government critics, and amending the constitution to restrict the powers of the monarchy, the last of which poses a flagrant test of the crown's willingness to wield the country's strict *lèse-majesté* law.

While King Vajiralongkorn, who by all accounts remains ensconced in Germany (where he resides for the vast majority of the year), has yet to comment publicly on the protests, the military has been unequivocal in its denunciation, with Apirat accusing critics of the government and monarchy of harboring "hatred for the nation." Prayut, for his part, has warned that Thailand is at risk of being "engulfed in flames" if protests continue. Beyond the fire and brimstone, the government has responded by targeting protest groups with arrests and has also successfully pressured Facebook to shut down a million-plus-strong discussion group named "Royalist Marketplace," which functioned as a forum for political grievances. In its place, a new, nearly identical Facebook group was created, underscoring the hydra-like nature of the grassroots movement. In an attempt to placate the protesters, the government has indicated that it may be willing to consider a degree of constitutional reform. However, it remains an open question whether such proposed changes—none of which have been outlined in detail—will be enough to lower the temperature in Bangkok.

What is certain is that historical red lines have been crossed and that few mitigating forces appear on the horizon. The dual-crises of a COVID-19-ravaged economy and the wilting legitimacy of the political status quo have created a perfect storm for Thailand's generals and their allies among the country's commercial elite. Moreover, the foundations of the military's mutually reinforcing relationship with the

monarchy, a dynamic that has served as the kingdom's true north for the extent of its modern history, are showing signs of unprecedented strain. By positioning itself so explicitly at the heart of Thailand's post-2014 order, the military now finds itself confronted with a political crisis in which it is unable to play the role of circuit breaker without further undermining its own legitimacy. Such is the price of imperium that Thailand's generals must now weigh.



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