

## Thailand: The Permanent Coup

Richard Bernstein

A few weeks ago, Mahawon Kawang, the operator of a small radio station in the ancient Thai city of Chiang Mai, got a phone call from the National Council for Peace and Order, also known as Thailand's military government, inviting him to the local army base for a "conversation." Mahawon went. To ignore an invitation from the NCPO is a criminal offense, usually punished by six months in jail. There were seven military officers present at the meeting, he told me, plus a representative of Thailand's broadcasting authority. They were friendly and polite; there was no roughing him up or any threat to do so, but the message was nonetheless forceful and clear. Mahawon had commented on the air about a delicate topic in Thailand, an investigation of a large Buddhist sect on suspicion of money laundering, and they wanted him to stop.

"They told me that this would cause social trouble," he said to me through a translator, "and if I do that again, my radio station will be closed down." Such is life in Thailand more than three years after the NCPO took power in the coup d'état of May 2014, replacing a democratically elected government whose base of support was an enormous populist movement generally known as the Red Shirts.

I first met Mahawon about three months after the military seized power. His was one of many Red Shirt stations whose existence reflected the strength and excitement generated by what had quickly become the most powerful grassroots movement in Thai history, formed by Thaksin Shinawatra, a charismatic but also worryingly autocratic billionaire. Thaksin, who was prime minister from 2001 until he was overthrown in a coup in 2006 and has since lived in exile, dominated Thai politics until the coup of 2014, mobilizing a new electoral majority made up mostly of the rural poor in the north and northeast of the country whose fervor for him reflected their belief that before him they had been neglected, and after him they had power.

And so when the 2014 coup took place, it was people like Mahawon—locally influential, articulate, and resourceful—who attracted the attention of the new military authorities. When I first met him, he'd been released from a week of involuntary residence at the local army cantonment, where he'd signed a vow of nonresistance to avoid the confiscation of his bank account. While he didn't welcome the coup, he conceded that the generals had put an end to the bitter political turmoil that had engulfed Thailand for months at a time.

He also predicted, as did many others, that the Red Shirts represented a powerful new force in Thailand that wouldn't go quietly away. In 2010, tens of thousands of Red Shirt protesters had occupied central Bangkok in a prolonged act of disobedience that, after furious, violent clashes with the police and the army, brought about the removal of a previous nonelected government. Mahawon believed that the Red Shirts would do something like that again if the army stayed in

power too long. In fact the present junta has managed to stay in power, and it's done so, it seems, with relative ease—there have been no Red Shirt uprisings or other serious protests against it—and its treatment of Mahawon, which could be thought of as a kind of soft but nonetheless Big-Brotherish repression, is one of the main ways it has been able to do so.

“Under the politeness was coercion,” Mahawon told me of his recent “conversation.” His livelihood was at stake. He was alone and powerless, facing the uniformed representatives of the junta, so he signed a letter of understanding in which he promised to avoid socially troublesome topics, and after a few hours he went back to work. He now plays music on his radio station, and he restricts his comments to safe subjects.

It wasn't supposed to be this way in Thailand, a country of nearly 70 million people that since the end of World War II has been both a close American ally and a hoped-for model of democratic development in Southeast Asia. In the early 2000s the growth rate was between 5 and 7 percent. A country that's had thirteen or so military coups in the past eighty-five years and that's always been plagued by corruption can't be called a successful democracy, but Thailand always returned to civilian rule, held freely-contested elections, and had a lively press, an educated middle class, and a long-serving king, Bhumipol Adulyadej, who projected an image of Buddha-like goodness while defining himself as the “protector of democracy.” Making a democratic system work seemed the collective national ambition.

Thailand hasn't lost all of that in its recent years of military rule, but this junta seems determined to be different from juntas past, to leave a more permanent mark. During its time in power, three events or trends can be identified that, taken together, mark a striking difference in contemporary Thailand.

One of them is in foreign policy, in which, as the political scientist Thitinan Pongsudhirak has written, the generals have “tilted” toward the Chinese, who are nearby, have deep pockets, and, unlike the United States and Europe, don't pester them about their violations of human rights—which, I was told more than once by informed Thais, the generals find deeply annoying. This tilt, according to Thitinan, “has imperiled the traditionally deft Thai balancing act between major powers.”

Second, last year, the ground almost seemed to quake in Thailand when King Bhumipol died after seventy years on the throne, and his son, sixty-five-year-old Maha Vajiralongkorn, succeeded him. Vajiralongkorn, who lives most of the time in Germany and is widely viewed as a decadent playboy, does not command the unifying respect that his father enjoyed, and this has introduced an element of uncertainty about the future. In fact the old king, especially in his later years, doesn't seem to have done much to protect Thai democracy, but he had the reputation of a ruler who cared deeply about the welfare of his people. Vajiralongkorn doesn't.

Third, and perhaps most important, this junta, unlike past ones that took over and then stepped away, leaving little permanent trace, has taken a series of measures indicating that it intends to hold on to power indefinitely, whether directly or indirectly. Several times already, Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-o-cha, pressed by the United States and by local public opinion,

has promised to allow elections and to restore civilian control. Most Thais seem to think that, eventually, the promise will be kept. But the military has now rigged the system, largely through the adoption of a new constitution that will leave generals essentially in control of any parliament that might be elected. In other words, there will in all likelihood not be a return to full democracy in Thailand, at least not anytime soon.

It takes a long time to transform a political culture, and in Thailand, that culture involves an almost automatic invocation of personal freedom. It's easy to find people who are angry and impatient with the military, and wishful that the new king would encourage a return to democratic norms. "We're not China," one local journalist told me. She was responding to my observation that, despite the tightness of military control, people seem unafraid to express their views. Various civil society groups, like the Thai Lawyers for Human Rights and the dissenting news website Prachatai, are able to operate without serious obstruction (though one of the dozen or so members of the lawyers' group has been charged under Thailand's lèse-majesté laws).

Why was Mahawon silenced while Prachatai continues to publish? There is some mystery to this, though some Thais I spoke to believe that the military, knowing that widespread brutality would alienate many Thais, strives for a kind of surgical repression. A person like Mahawon speaks to a pro-Red Shirt audience, the main source of potential violent opposition, while Prachatai is read mostly by intellectuals and the middle class. "We're used to things like free speech and a free press, and we want them back," the journalist said.

But Thailand is shifting, becoming more like its neighbors. Indeed, one quip among Thais is "We're becoming Myanmar," which is said in rueful recognition of some discomfiting similarities—most importantly that Myanmar suffered under military rule for decades, and that even though it has held elections and returned to civilian government, its military still exercises predominant control. At the same time, China has cultivated close ties with both Thai generals and parts of the business elite. Last year, ignoring sharp protests from the US and Europe, the Bangkok government acceded to a Chinese demand that some hundred Uighurs who were asking for asylum in Thailand be returned to China; they were brought to the airport with hoods over their heads. China has recently sold a submarine to the Thai navy at a reportedly discounted price, with an option for two more, and \$87 million worth of armored personnel carriers to its army, and it is asking Thailand to cooperate in some of the huge projects involved in the vast infrastructure-building program that China calls One Belt One Road—including a high-speed train between Kunming in Yunnan Province and Bangkok.

This may not really mean that the United States is in retreat. Relations between the two countries remain extensive and varied and include the military-to-military exchanges that have been part of Thai-American cooperation since the Vietnam War, when Thailand was home to at least seven major American air bases. But China is advancing, which gives many Thais the feeling that American influence is declining. Moreover, with a president in the White House who seems to have a soft spot for authoritarians, the forces pushing Thailand in a democratic direction are weakening, and this brings with it a melancholy feeling that the country's difficult, stormy, and sometimes even successful experiment with multiparty democracy is being quietly abandoned.

Nothing illustrates the turn toward authoritarian methods more strikingly than the military's increased use of Thailand's lèse-majesté laws—which make it a crime to insult members of the royal family—as a tool of the harsher repression that accompanies the gentler invitations to military bases to talk. According to iLaw, a nongovernmental organization that keeps track of political prosecutions in Thailand, eighty-two people are known to have been charged with offenses under these laws since the present government took power, and sentences of up to sixty years have been meted out—though reduced to thirty years in exchange for a guilty plea by the defendant.

Lillian Suwanrumpha/AFP/Getty Images

Former Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra with supporters outside the Supreme Court, Bangkok, August 2017

The capricious effect of the military's use of these prosecutions can be seen in the case of Thanakorn Siripaiboon, a factory worker who was twenty-seven years old when he was arrested at home at the end of 2015. His offense, according to Thai human rights groups, was to have clicked the “like” button on a Facebook post that made what were deemed to be sarcastic references not to the king himself, or the queen, or the crown prince, but to Tongdaeng, the late dog of King Bhumipol, about whom the monarch once wrote a best-selling book (in which the dog emerged, parable-like, as a model of proper obedience and reverence for royal authority). Thanakorn, out on bail of about \$15,000 and awaiting a military trial, faces a maximum sentence of thirty-seven years in prison.

“If they can't find one way to get a person, they'll find another way,” Anon Nampha of Thai Lawyers for Human Rights told me. He gave the example of a thirty-two-year-old optometrist from the northern city of Chiang Rai named Saravut—his last name has been withheld—whose crime was to have posted a picture of the new king, Vajiralongkorn, while the then crown prince was strolling through a Munich shopping mall. The picture was drawn from a video that went viral on YouTube last year in which the crown prince could be seen wearing close-fitting jeans and a cut-off T-shirt revealing what looked like motorcycle gang tattoos on his arm, back, and stomach. Vajiralongkorn, who has been married and divorced three times, is seen in the video in the company of a woman. Saravut spent thirty-eight days in prison before being able to post bail; he is awaiting trial.

Lying behind such prosecution is what the military perceives as an urgent need to be seen as defending the monarchy, which it equates with patriotism. There is an almost cult-like quality to this. The kings' pictures are everywhere in Thailand, the old king's and the new one's. (Or as one Thai put it to me, the good king and the bad one.) Ride the Bangkok elevated Skytrain, and between station announcements and video ads for face cream will be reverential memorials to King Bhumipol—the kind and caring figure who enabled “all Thais to have the same father” and who will “live forever in our hearts.”

Pictures of Vajiralongkorn, whose formal coronation will take place over several lavish days this fall, have been put up at government buildings, schools, military encampments, traffic circles, bus stops, airports, and train stations. He wears an elaborate gold-embroidered cloak or a white, bemedaled military tunic with epaulets, a look of sternness and command on his face. This approved image of the new king clashes with the womanizing, fast-car-driving, spoiled-rich-kid reputation he acquired when he was crown prince, which no doubt explains the prosecutions of people who simply post pictures of the tattooed jetsetter on Facebook. The *lèse-majesté* laws in this sense are not only a way for the military to enforce its authority but also a kind of propaganda device, a way of dropping an unwanted image down the memory hole while manufacturing the desired one.

Exalting the monarchy is one goal of the junta. Another is to prevent a resurgence of the Red Shirt movement. It's hard to know how much influence Thaksin, the Red Shirt supreme leader, retains. Clearly, he stays in touch with his allies in Thailand. Mahawon told me that he's visited him in exile twice. Moreover, somewhat paradoxically, some of Thaksin's policies remain in effect, including a universal health care program and cash disbursements to village councils to use as they see fit.

There's no doubt that Thaksin benefited from a fanatical loyalty in his areas of support, and probably still does, but he was reviled and feared elsewhere, especially by the members of what was called the Bangkok elite—royalists, the middle and upper classes, factions in the military, and the royal establishment—who saw him as a potential elected dictator, a sort of Thai Putin who was using his office for personal gain and personal aggrandizement, and putting relatives and friends in important positions. He also carried out a war on drugs, sanctioned by the king, with what human rights groups said was murderous force—some 2,500 alleged drug dealers were said to have been killed by police.

The anti-Thaksin forces became a rival mass movement to the Red Shirts known as the Yellow Shirts—yellow being the color of the monarchy. And for years, Thai politics repeated a basic pattern: the Thaksin party would win an open, free election, the Yellow Shirts would take to the streets in paralyzing protests against the elected government—once shutting down Bangkok's international airport, another time forcing the prime minister to abandon his office—which would lead, whether by coup or some other means, to the removal of that government, and then the cycle would repeat itself when the Thaksin party won new elections.

The last phase of the cycle, which was chaotic and sometimes deadly, came in 2014, three years after Thaksin's sister, Yingluck Shinawatra, became prime minister, winning the last elections to have been held in Thailand. It was she who was removed at the end of a sequence of tumultuous events that involved new, highly disruptive Yellow Shirt protests and, finally, the seizure of power by the junta and General Prayuth. In 2014, after the overthrow of Yingluck, a prominent Thai public figure, who asked not to be named, told me that where Thaksin was concerned there were only two possibilities: an assassination or a coup.

In addition to the summonses for "conversations"—which themselves reveal a comprehensive intelligence network and a lot of monitoring of social media—the military keeps things under control by such measures as a ban on all political gatherings of more than five people and a

clause, known as Article 44, in a provisional constitution adopted after the coup that makes lawful any measure that Prayuth deems necessary to “strengthen public unity and harmony.” Trials of former Red Shirts for their participation in past demonstrations that turned violent are underway, and several of the movement’s most prominent leaders live in exile. In addition, Yingluck is being prosecuted for alleged negligence in a government rice-purchasing program during her administration.

Her prosecution may prove a risk for the junta. Whenever she has appeared in court, hundreds of people—defying the ban on political gatherings of more than five people—turn up to show their support. Yingluck is attractive and telegenic. In her last court appearance at the beginning of August, she declared herself to be a “victim of a deep political game,” which seemed a plausible summing up of her situation.

The widespread assumption was that Yingluck would be found guilty, but on August 25, the day the verdict in her case was supposed to be announced, she failed to appear in court and was reported to have fled the country, forfeiting nearly one million dollars in bail. Her surprise departure was a new twist in the Shinawatra drama that has transfixed Thailand for years, though it could be a gift to the junta, which faced the risk that putting Yingluck in prison would prompt new Red Shirt protests. Still, with the verdict postponed until the end of September, the uncertainty prompted by her case remains unresolved.

“There will be a time when the people can’t stand it anymore,” Mahawon told me. “I know people who are ready to go fight. They are waiting for the right time. I don’t know when that will be, but it will be soon.”

Contrasting with this prediction is the view that the Red Shirts are a spent force, their energy sapped by the exile of their most fiery leaders, the long absence of Thaksin, and the aging of their rank and file. “This is a country that has overthrown many dictatorial governments,” Kraisak Choonhavan, a former senator from the Democrat Party, Thaksin’s main pre-coup opposition, told me. “People are ready to die. However, you always had a core leadership with hard-core supporters, and the mass built around them, but these supporters are no longer there.”

What will happen? The military has many detractors, not just former Red Shirts, but middle-class intellectuals, journalists, academics, and others. Some of these people may not have liked Thaksin, but they acknowledge that he was democratically elected; they abhor the human rights violations being committed by the military, and they want it to relinquish control. Prayuth and the junta have vowed to do this, and the expectation is that they will—perhaps after the coronation of the new king. “The military knows not to overstay its welcome,” Panitan Wattanayagorn, a professor of international relations at Chulalongkorn University and a security adviser to the government, told me. “If they do, they will be in trouble.”

But Panitan spoke also of the fear of turmoil that competes with the fear of permanent military government. Thailand seems caught in a kind of “precarious limbo,” as Thitinan has put it, between the wish for an end to military rule and a fear that if the military does step down and new elections are held, there will simply be a repetition of the past sixteen years, with all of

their chaos and bloodshed. The greatest terror for Yellow Shirts and their supporters would be a return of Thaksin to power, and it must be remembered that he or a stand-in for him, including Yingluck herself, has won all four elections held in Thailand since 2001. Given that, it's hard to see how the objective of eradicating Thaksin's influence can be squared with a restoration of a democratic system.

So the generals have devised a kind of guided democracy based on the new constitution. Under it, the military will appoint the entirety of the upper house of a bicameral legislature, which means it would be impossible for any laws to be passed or for a prime minister to take office without the generals' approval. The new constitution also mandates supervisory councils to monitor government departments.

It might work, but that's far from certain. People who say it will work point to the ability of the military to get the constitution passed by a 61 percent majority in a referendum last year. People who say it won't point to the fact that advocates of a "no" vote in the referendum were not allowed to campaign, that the turnout was low, and that several provinces in the north and northeast (Thaksin's strongholds) voted against it, despite a blanket campaign by the military government to persuade people to vote yes.

Since the abolition of the absolute monarchy in 1932, Thailand has had thirteen coups, in addition to six attempted but unsuccessful military takeovers. There have been twenty constitutions or charters. No civilian government has ever lasted more than a few years without falling to military control, and no military coup has resisted pressure to return the country to civilian rule. That's been the pattern of Thai politics.

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