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Thailand: A New Polity in the Making?¹

*By Porphant Ouyyanont**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Thailand's military came to power through a coup on 22 May 2014. This paper asks whether this coup departs from previous coups with respect to the nature of the regime it has now established.
- Many aspects of the present military government's policies do differ from those of previous coups. These include the pervasive army presence, the clampdown on dissent, the centralization of power, widespread censorship, and the uncertain timetable before a new Constitution is passed and elections held.
- The focus of its policies is on dismantling the political apparatus set up under ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. The measures Thaksin took in 2001-2006 threatened the traditional elites, which had prevailed under the "bureaucratic polity". They also threatened the royalist influence that Duncan McCargo has termed "network monarchy". He endeavoured to modernize the Thai political system by erecting a strong prime-minister-led polity and bypassing the traditional strongholds of elite power.

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented on 23 September 2014 at an ISEAS Public Seminar organized by its *Thailand Studies Programme*. The assigned title has been retained. I am grateful to Professor Malcolm Falkus for his help in developing the argument and organization of this paper, and also for helpful suggestions from ISEAS researchers: Terence Chong, Michael Montesano, and Daljit Singh.

- Both “bureaucratic polity” and “network monarchy” imply a weak state, alongside the notion that the resultant balancing of forces hampers the emergence in Thailand of a strong government, as had occurred in certain states of East Asia.
- To counteract Thaksin’s measures, and to eliminate what is seen as his power base (strong electoral support from the relatively poor northeastern and northern regions), the military government has entrenched its authority to a greater extent than has occurred under previous military coups.
- At the same time, the influence of the network monarchy has relied on it being a counterbalance between factions, a role that the present strengthening of the military regime may undermine.

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INTRODUCTION

The political situation in Thailand today has understandably attracted a great deal of attention, both generally and from scholars. It is appropriate that we should try to understand the nature and background of the military coup that took place on May 22, 2014.

Questions asked in this paper include the following: Is the present coup simply one in a succession of military coups that have marked Thailand's political history (this is the 19th coup since the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932, 12 of which were successful), or is it something new? Is it a return to the "bureaucratic polity" identified by Riggs in the 1960s², or has the bureaucratic polity been changed fundamentally?

Briefly, I suggest that we are in fact seeing something quite novel. The essence of the traditional bureaucratic polity was the maintenance of a weak but functioning state, while the policies of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra³ attempted to turn Thailand into a modern and strong state. However, in attempting to crush the pro-Thaksin forces, the military has assumed the mantle of a strong state. Hence its power today involves deep structural changes and covers a greater dimension than has been the case.

We should, though, approach the topic with caution. The coup is very recent one, just four months old. The coup leader, General Prayuth Chan-ocha, has become Prime Minister, has an appointed cabinet, and has a road map for a new constitution, legislative assembly, and elections. But it is still too early to know the long-term intentions of the coup leaders, and how long they intend to remain in full control. Since the government is dominated by military figures with no track-record of administrative experience (in fact, all major cabinet positions are held by the military), it is much too early to judge their competence or their degree of unity. We know, of course, that the coup leader and Prime Minister is deeply conservative and that he is an ardent royalist, and we know that the government is committed to abolishing the basis of Thaksin's political influence. But how General Prayuth and his government will deal with the many divisive forces in Thai society, and whether he can produce an economic environment that provides both economic development and smoothens some of the obvious inequalities that underlie the social divisions in Thailand, remains to be seen.

To a quite remarkable extent, the coup leaders have cracked down on any form of criticism. This has been achieved in a number of ways: through martial law throughout the country together with a heavy military presence; closing or censoring newspapers and television channels; summoning opposition figures and potential critics for interviews (and sometimes detaining them); controlling social media, and in numerous other ways. Prayuth's weekly television statements frequently

² Fred W. Riggs, *Thailand: The Modernization of a Bureaucratic Polity* (1966). Riggs argued that political change remained within the military-elite dominated bureaucracy, with the mass of the population having little effective voice.

³ Thaksin Shinawatra, a wealthy businessman, founded the TRT (Thai Rak Thai) Party in 1998. He became Prime Minister in 2001, and won further elections in 2005 and 2006. He was overthrown by a military coup in September 2006.

contain veiled threats and warnings, such as “We know who our opponents are, but we do not wish to use force”.⁴ Furthermore, the junta continues to use *lèse majesté* laws to stifle dissent.

It is therefore quite difficult to ascertain the level of dissent or even to find material for an objective assessment of the achievements or shortcomings of the government. It does not help that the Thais are now very careful about what they say.

Initially, I will outline some aspects of the extent and nature of junta policies, but I also wish to draw attention to two important background points.

One is the significance of the 1997 Constitution. That Constitution was abolished in the 2006 coup and replaced with a new one in 2007. The 1997 Constitution in turn was a direct result of the military coup of 1992, which led to bloodshed and a desperate search for a stable political structure. This Constitution gave an enhanced role to political parties and to the Prime Minister. Cabinet members now had to be elected, while the role of the opposition was diminished.⁵ Such measures, unintentionally, led directly to the rise of Thaksin and his Thai Rak Thai party. As one commentator put it in 2003, “constitutional mechanisms have played a role in the rise of Thai Rak Thai, especially in allowing Thaksin to keep a strong hold over his party, his House coalition, and his cabinet”.⁶ With this strength, Thaksin was able to increase his control over the nominally independent Senate and the judiciary.

The point here is that the 1997 Constitution introduced a new force into Thai politics, and so threatened the checks and balances—and the resultant weak state—that had characterized the earlier bureaucratic polity. We may add that the 1997 Asian crisis also gave an opportunity for Thaksin to present policies opposed to the unpopular IMF-imposed austerity measures enacted by the Chuan Leekpai government.

The second background point is demographic in nature. Relative to its per capita national income, Thailand has always had a very high proportion of its population located in rural areas, and the Northeast in particular has maintained roughly 30 per cent of the total population. Despite significant improvements in economic and social indicators, the Northeast trails other regions in virtually all respects. In 2011, the per capita gross domestic product of the Northeast was still less than one eighth of that of Bangkok. Whatever the gains in absolute incomes and whatever the poverty reduction achieved in the country in recent decades, large inequalities remain and in some areas have in fact increased. There is a correlation between a region’s electoral support for Thaksin and its relative economic disadvantage. Thus, compared with all other Thai provinces, Nong Bua Lamphu, in the heart of the rice-growing Northeast, has the lowest per capita income, and it also

⁴ “Prayuth: Opposition Still Active”, *Bangkok Post*, 22, August, 2014.

⁵ The 1997 Constitution aimed to control the money politics of previous years through various reforms, including changes to the parliamentary system and the creation of independent institutions, such as the Election Commission and the Constitutional Court. See Duncan McCargo, “Democracy Under Stress in Thaksin’s Thailand”, *Journal of Democracy*, 13, 4, Oct. 2002, pp. 112-126.

⁶ Dr. Niyom Rathamarit, “The 1997 Constitution: the Path of Reform”, *Thai Update Conference, Canberra, 2003*, p.6.

recorded the highest proportion of votes for pro-Thaksin parties, both in 2005 and in 2011.⁷

A further 8 per cent of the Thai population live in the Northern provinces. Thus between them, the North and Northeast hold nearly forty per cent of the total Thai population. The electoral clout of the North and Northeast is therefore quite considerable. Thus the Northeast returned 136 out of the 400 members of parliament in 2005. In the 2005 election, Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai party gained no less than 126 of these seats, many with huge majorities. The Democrat Party won just two seats in those regions. This is the historical basis of the Thaksin dilemma that faced those opposing him: a huge and seemingly impregnable majority, representing the poorest and most rural areas of the country.

In this paper I will first note some of the current policies of the military government, drawing attention to the high degree of military control and to the extent to which the policies affect all aspects of Thai society. Secondly, I will undertake an analysis of these policies and argue that they mark a departure in the type of Thai state that is being established.

MILITARY INFLUENCE

Firstly, and most obviously, is the extent to which the military dominate the government and most of its agencies. The coup of May 22 was led by the Commander in Chief of the army, General Prayuth Chan-ocha, who was named interim Prime Minister on August 21 by the National Legislative Assembly appointed by the junta authority, the National Council for Peace and Order. Prayuth's cabinet was announced on August 30, and 11 out of 32 cabinet ministers, taking up 34 positions, are military figures. These positions cover virtually all the key posts: Justice, Interior, Foreign Affairs, Defence, Labour, Social Development, Commerce, and Natural Resources. In addition, some important positions have gone to senior bureaucrats who were prominent in the anti-Thaksin movements. The Minister of Finance, for example, is a civilian Sommai Phasee, who was part of the government installed after the 2006 coup. Another civilian, Pridiyathorn Devakula is a deputy prime minister with special responsibility for economic strategy. He was formerly the governor of the Thai central bank, and served as Finance Minister after the previous military coup in 2006.

⁷ In 2012 the per capita GDP of Nong Bua Lamphu was 41,480 baht. This may be compared with that of the the richest Northeastern province, Khon Kaen, which was 106,587 baht and Bangkok metropolis, where it was 436,479 baht. In the 2011 election, 82.6 percent of voters in Nong Bua Lamphu voted for the pro-Thaksin Pheu Thai party compared with the average in the Northeast of 68.2 per cent. (<http://www.ect.go.th/newweb/upload/cms07/download/3145-2801-0.pdf>; www.thaiwebsites.com/provinces-GDP.asp).

DEMOCRACY VERSUS STABILITY

A key theme in announcements from the junta, and in General Prayuth's weekly televised messages, has been the necessity for stability and order. This is to be achieved by strong rule until such time as democratic processes such as elections can be reintroduced. The denigration of the Thaksin political system is explicit. To give an indication of such thinking, it is worth quoting from one of Prayuth's televised speeches: "Many people still try to destabilize the situation by using the words 'democracy' and 'election'. These people do not see that an incomplete democracy is not safe and it does not create confidence in the global community... the distribution of revenues is unjust, while corruption, wrongful activities, encroachment of natural resources and environment are encouraged, and the public will be told that these things are good, righteous, and beneficial to them".⁸

Here I will simply note Prayuth's distrust of "democracy" and "elections" under the former system, and his belief that the public can be misled by being told that unrighteous policies are "good". Here, in a nutshell, is the Yellow Shirt fear of an ignorant electorate being duped by ill-intentioned politicians.

Prayuth continues with what I take to be an indication that it will be a long time before he thinks the Thai public can make appropriate decisions through the ballot box. He fears that "after the junta addressed certain problems... some influential figures would return to exploit other people again. They would use social pressure and mislead people with low income. These wrongdoers use the general public as a hostage. This must come to an end... If we let the old democracy continue, it will greatly damage the country and slow down the country's development".⁹ We may note that Prayuth again explicitly argues that it is those with "low-incomes" who are vulnerable to the wrongdoers. In other words he equates poverty with ignorance and ignorance with vulnerability to populist policies.

UBIQUITY

To an extent quite unprecedented in the history of Thai coups, the present military regime has made its presence felt throughout the country and in many aspects of Thai social and political life. The backdrop to the pervasive junta presence includes martial law, the weekly televised messages from General Prayuth (shown compulsorily by all television channels), and specific measures affecting aspects of Thai life. An early and well-publicized measure was the payment of 92 billion baht owed to more than 800,000 rice farmers under the policies of the previous Yingluck Shinawatra government.

⁸ *Bangkok Post*, August 22, 2014.

⁹ *Ibid.*

Some measures are aimed at achieving social order such as popular but low-level measures against gang-led motorcycle taxi rackets, taxi scams at airports, and vendors on the beaches. Less popular has been a clampdown on gambling, even at village level. Such a clampdown, of course, provides the occasion for military patrols and a high army profiling throughout the country.

Other measures seem aimed at gaining favour from the ordinary public and can be quite bizarre. The junta forced television companies to show World Cup football matches on free-to-air channels, and next month will provide 20,000 free tickets for a football match against Colombia. Such measures, under a general policy to bring back “happiness” to the Thai people, also include free army concerts and haircuts, and to some may seem indicative of a condescending attitude towards the general public.

We should note also the long-term nature of many of the junta’s policies. A prominent example here are proposed school reforms, which are not simply measures to improve educational quality and efficiency, but also normative measures to introduce into school curricula subjects related to ethics, social responsibility, and patriotism. The junta has produced a timetable of 15 months during which it will introduce political and economic reforms prior to calling for an election. Some analysts suspect however that the period of military control will be longer than this, and that the revised Constitution under which the election will be held will cement the military’s influence through its control of key institutions.

STATE-OWNED ENTERPRISES

Another element in junta policies has been the control of state-owned enterprises. There are 56 such enterprises, and they include some of the largest commercial enterprises in the country, such as the Petroleum Authority of Thailand (PTT) and Thai Airways. Their combined assets amount to around \$360 billion. It was widely believed that Thaksin used his influence to give appointments in many of these enterprises to his political supporters. This was contrary to a long tradition of control of state enterprises by the traditional royalist elite, which always maintained strong links to the military. Thaksin oversaw a measure of privatization, boosting liquidity through sales of shares to the public. Thus, the removal by the military regime of powerful business leaders in the state sector who were appointed under pro-Thaksin governments has been a key measure for reducing pro-Thaksin influence.

Among such changes have been the resignations of the PTT Chairman, the Chairman of the Krung Thai Bank, and the heads of the Government Lottery Office and the Airports of Thailand.

CENTRALIZATION

Another feature of junta policies has been the centralization of power in Bangkok and an increase in Bangkok's administrative and financial control over provincial areas. This stems not only from the actuality of centralized military rule, but from measures to reduce the power of provincial officials. Cassey Lee notes that "A key feature of military rule is the centralization of decision-making power".¹⁰

The reasons for centralization rest mainly in the belief that Thaksin and pro-Thaksin political parties built up a power base in the provinces through the appointment of political allies to key positions, at all levels from that of provincial governor downwards. The village fund and other populist measures for example transferred central funds to the villages and provinces, and thus enhanced political support for Thaksin and resulted in the election of pro-Thaksin local candidates.

As a result, the junta has taken a number of steps to alter the situation. An early measure was to transfer 13 provincial governors, mainly from regions in the North and Northeast, where pro-Thaksin sentiment was strong. An example was the transfer of Wichien Puttiwinyu, governor of Chiang Mai, Thaksin's home province.¹¹

Another early edict suspended the election of all local officials and administrators when their terms of office end. In Bangkok, when a position becomes vacant, a committee set up under the Ministry of the Interior will select replacements. In the provinces, provincial selection committees will be established, also under the Interior Ministry, to choose replacements.

A further significant step was to make a steep cut in the central budget allocations to local administrations. For the fiscal year 2015, the total budget subsidy to local authorities has been cut from 61 billion baht to 37 billion baht. This, of course, considerably reduces the areas in which local authorities can implement "populist" policies and vote-winning measures. Thus, at the end of July, the junta abolished various locally-directed bodies created by the Thaksin and Yingluck governments. They included the Village Fund, the Medium Enterprise Development Fund, and the Regional Town Development Fund. We may note the developmental character of some of these bodies, as opposed to the more traditional charity and aid initiatives granted from above. The Budget Bureau explicitly noted that "Populist programmes such as allowances for the elderly and handicapped, and lunch and milk for students, may have to be moved from Local Administration budgets and financed from other sources".¹²

¹⁰ Cassey Lee, "Whither Thailand's Juntanomics?", *ISEAS Perspective*, July 8, 2014, p.4.

¹¹ Amy Sawitta Lefevre and Aukkarapon Niyomyat, "Thailand's Junta sidelines pro-Thaksin Police, Governors", *Reuters*, June 5, 2014 (<http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/06/05/uk-thailand-politics-reshuffle-idUKKBN0EG03720140605>).

¹² *Bangkok Post*, Sept. 3, <http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/local/430278/agreement-reached-on-local-budgets>.

Another related centralizing measure has been a diminishing of the role of the police. Centralization includes not only reducing the power of the police in provincial areas, but extending military power over the police in Bangkok. Thaksin himself was in the police force for 13 years before embarking on his business enterprises, and the police have widely been considered as a source of support for Thaksin and pro-Thaksin political parties. The police force is under the command of the Prime Minister's office, and this enabled both Thaksin and Yingluck Shinawatra to appoint loyalists. One was Thaksin's brother-in-law, who was appointed chief of police in 2011. As part of junta policies to de-politicize the police, a number of leading police officials have been transferred, both in Bangkok and the provinces. Soon after the coup, for example, several of the most senior police officials in Chiang Mai, including the provincial police commander, were relocated.¹³

DISSENT

Most commentators on the policies of the junta have noted the extraordinary level to which the authorities have tried to clamp down on dissent. This is closely allied to the ubiquitous nature of the regime I have noted before.

Martial law has enabled the government to extend such measures as the banning throughout the country of protest meetings and gatherings of more than five people. In addition, the authorities exercise control and censorship, or the threat of censorship, over newspapers and television channels, and some newspapers, radio stations, and television channels, have been closed down.

The government also clamps down on social media. Initially the authorities tried to block Facebook and also called for meetings with Facebook and Twitter. These were unsuccessful, but the junta lets it be known that those posting anti-coup comments on social media will be tracked. Some websites, such as Human Rights Watch, are blocked.

A well-publicized instance of the Junta's sensitivity to dissent was the recent last-minute cancellation of an event organized by Amnesty International and other groups at the Foreign Correspondent's Club in Bangkok. Police turned up to demand the cancellation of the event, titled "Access to Justice in Thailand: Currently Unavailable", requesting the organizers to "follow the policy of the NCPO"¹⁴.

The junta has also summoned a large number of people, most of them former politicians and activists, for questioning and warnings. The current number is estimated at well over 600, and some of them have been detained for up to a week. The reach of the junta has also stretched overseas. The well-known academic opposed to the military regime, Pavin Chachavalpongpun, has had his Thai passport revoked. Dr. Pavin claims that the junta instructed the Thai Consul-

¹³ Amy Sawitta Lefevre and Aukkarapon Niyomyat, op.cit..

¹⁴ *Bangkok Post*, Sept.2, 2014 (<http://www.bangkokpost.com/lite/topstories/430103/ncpo-forces-rights-groups-to-cancel-forum>).

General in Osaka to “discuss” Dr. Pavin’s position with the Director of the Centre for Southeast Asian Studies at Kyoto University, where he works.¹⁵

ANALYSIS OF JUNTA POLICIES

I have outlined various aspects of junta policies since the coup in May. Let me now turn to an analysis of these policies by asking two questions: Does the present military takeover represent something distinct in modern Thai political history, or is it one in a long line of similar military coups; and do junta policies represent a “return to bureaucratic polity”? The latter has recently been suggested by Puangthong Pawakapan in a recent *ISEAS Perspective*, where she wrote that “Thailand may be argued to have returned to a bureaucratic polity, where the military, bureaucrats and business interests gain control over elected representatives”.¹⁶ *The Economist* has recently suggested that “the consensus among most seasoned observers is that the latest spell of military rule will blow over like the last one, which was soon followed by civilian rule and fresh elections”.¹⁷

In my view, the essence of the bureaucratic polity, as it was described by Riggs in the 1960s, was that it represented an amalgam of often competing power groupings, but with a dominant military-bureaucracy complex. The polity rested on a pluralistic balance of forces. The groupings included the military, the royalist elites, and senior bureaucrats. Other elements within Thai society, including the police, business interests, and elected representatives in parliament, all contributed to the checks and balances that underpinned the bureaucratic polity.

The essence of this bureaucratic polity was that it produced a “weak state”. Here I use the term elaborated by Somboon Siriprachai.¹⁸ Somboon was concerned particularly to understand the different growth paths and growth performances of Thailand, on the one hand, and the East Asian NICs – Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and also Singapore, on the other. He stressed that the NIC countries were notable for their strong state systems and unified policy goals. While corruption and rent seeking were certainly prevalent in a number of these countries, a strong state leadership with the single goal of industrialization and economic growth was the major characteristic. Indeed, rent-seeking can be turned to advantage insofar as it stimulates particular targeted sectors of the economy. Thailand, by contrast, was divided by factions and the competing interests of the various

¹⁵ Pavin Chachavalpongpun, “Enemies of the Coup: Fugitives of the Thai Junta”, *The Diplomat*, July 3, 2014 (<http://thediplomat.com/2014/07/enemies-of-the-coup-fugitives-of-the-thai-junta/>)

See also Claudio Sopranzetti, “Thailand under the Junta: Paranoia and Conspiracy”, *Al Jazeera English*, Opinion, 22 July, 2014 (www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/07/thailand-under-junta-201472171432889150.html)

¹⁶ Puangthong Pawakapan, “The Thai Junta’s Interim Constitution: Towards an Anti-Electoral Democracy”, *ISEAS Perspective*, August 12, 2014, p.4.

¹⁷ *The Economist*, Sept. 13-19, 2014, p.27.

¹⁸ Somboon Siriprachai, “Export-Orientated Industrialization with Land Abundance and a Weak State”, in Somboon Siriprachai, *Industrialization with a Weak State*, ed. Kaoru Sugihara, Pasuk Phongpaichit, and Chris Baker, Kyoto, 2012, pp. 37-38.

power groups. The weak state that emerged was unsuited for the long-term policies of the type pursued by the East Asian NICs.

Thailand's weak state existed until the opening of the present century. Following the end of the short-lived Suchinda military regime in 1992 and the return of an elected parliament in September of that year, a succession of unstable coalition governments ensured that the Thai state remained weak. Thus Thailand could still be considered a bureaucratic polity even in a period of elected parliaments. The influence of the military, senior bureaucrats, and traditional elites remained strong. Reflecting on Riggs' term for a moment, it is true that a number of scholars have criticized the concept of a bureaucratic polity because it presents a static picture of Thai society and because it ignores the development of new social forces.

Duncan McCargo argues that the term ignores one of the most significant forces in the Thai polity: the monarchy, and the various monarchical and royalist power groupings. He prefers the term "network monarchy" to describe the Thai polity.¹⁹ The key point here is that the role of the network monarchy is enhanced in the weak state. As McCargo notes, under a constitutional monarchy it is difficult for a monarch, either in person or through such institutions as the Privy Council, to exercise overt influence. However, if the political leaders appear to lose legitimacy, perhaps through an unpopular military coup, or through incompetent and corrupt elected governments, then the monarch can stand above politics and exercise a very real influence. Thus the network monarchy and the weak state are interconnected; the network monarchy requires a weak state. Indeed, "the palace had a degree of vested interest in preserving a partly dysfunctional political order, one that permitted just the right degree of monarchical intervention to maintain royal prestige"²⁰.

The 1997 financial crisis and the 1997 Constitution provided a platform for change, which came with the rise of Thaksin Shinawatra and the Thai Rak Thai Party. As we have seen, Thai Rak Thai won a large electoral victory in 2001, with Thaksin becoming the first Prime Minister in Thai history to see out his full term in office.

Many commentators have focused on such negative aspects of the Thaksin regime as money politics, corruption, human rights abuses, nepotism, and so on. However, Akira Suehiro points to a more fundamental feature of Thai politics which challenged the existing roles of the traditional elites.²¹ This was Thaksin's attempt to modernize Thai politics and, in doing so, create a strong rather than a weak state. In Suehiro's words, Thaksin's reforms, prior to the coup, appeared "to have transformed Thailand from a traditional bureaucratic polity into a modern state"²².

¹⁹ Duncan McCargo, "Network Monarchy and Legitimacy Crises in Thailand", *The Pacific Review*, 18, 4, Dec. 2005, pp. 499-519.

²⁰ Ibid. p.506.

²¹ Akira Suehiro, "Technocracy and Thaksinocracy in Thailand: Reforms of the Public Sector and the Budget System", *South East Asian Studies*, 3, 2, August, 2014, pp. 299-344.

²² Ibid. p.299.

Thaksin's measures involved a lessening role for such traditional bureaucratic influence by centralizing power in the hands of the Prime Minister. There was, for example, a reduction in the policy-forming roles of the NESDB and the Ministry of Finance. Indeed, to quote Suehiro again, "the whole structure of policy-making under the Thaksin government suggests the increasing concentration of power in the hands of the prime minister alongside the exclusion of bureaucratic influence in the decision-making process. Thaksin apparently aimed to replace the Thai bureaucratic polity with a prime-minister led politics".²³ As part of these fundamental shifts, the budget allocations to the armed forces were reduced in relative terms. Naturally this invoked opposition from the military.

Moreover Thaksin's way of exercising power and his emphasis on efficiency and business management were seen by many as a direct challenge to Thai traditions, and also as a threat to the monarchy. Certainly under Thaksin there was less emphasis on the King's advocacy of a "sufficiency economy", and more on maximizing growth and becoming competitive.

Thaksin thus attempted to create a strong state with power centralized around the elected Prime Minister. Of course, the populist policies of the first Thaksin government were widely seen as means towards ensuring continued electoral success.

Thaksin's overwhelming victory in the election of 2005 marked the start of a period of division in Thai society—the yellow shirt protests, followed by the military coup of 2006, the subsequent red shirt movement and bloody clashes of 2010, the electoral victory of Yingluck Shinawatra and the Pheu Thai Party in 2011, and so to the coup of May 2014.

It is very likely that the immediate cause of the military coups in 2006 and 2014 was in Thaksin's challenge to the bureaucratic polity/network monarchy. The weak state was being transformed into a strong state and elements of traditional elite power and influence were being marginalized.

Viewed in this light, some of the principal characteristics of the present regime become explicable. First and foremost, the strong state created by Thaksin necessitated a strong authoritarian government in response. This is the reason for the prolonged period of martial law, and the lengthy period envisaged for the framing of a new Constitution and eventual elections under this Constitution. It is because the ruling military authority sees clearly the threat to the traditional bureaucratic polity posed by Thaksin's prime-minister-led polity based on electoral support, that features of junta policies such as the crackdown on dissent, the demonization of opponents especially those allied to the Thaksin family, and attempts to reform the power bases of Thaksin in the provinces, in the police, and in state enterprises, become explicable. Indeed it seems to me that the pervasive crackdown on dissent can be viewed not entirely as paranoia or an attempt to eradicate red-shirt opposition, but as a more fundamental attempt to impart legitimacy to the regime. In earlier periods of Thai history, widespread discontent has been seen as an acceptable reason for political change. The absence of dissent implies legitimacy in the eyes of the junta.

²³ Ibid.313-4.

Thus a strong authoritarian government is being created for the first time since at least the Sarit regime of the late 1950s. The need for a long-term strategy arises precisely because the coup leaders are trying to obliterate the challenge presented by Thaksin. And this cannot be done by turning back to a weak state bureaucratic polity. In fact, the traditional bureaucratic polity appears to have been discarded and replaced with an authoritarian regime that intends to control the country for a long time.

If this analysis is correct, it raises a further, and final, reflection. We have noted, following McCargo, that the network monarchy requires a weak state for its legitimacy. In a weak state, the constitutional monarchy can stand above factional party politics and moderate undue and unpopular military influence. A strong military-led polity would thus appear to undermine the network monarchy, which is ironic in view of the strong royalist sentiments of the military and anti-Thaksin forces.

But perhaps we should consider this: the king is 86 years old; Prem Tinsulanond, chairman of the Privy Council and who still appears to have immense influence, is 94. The succession looms large in Thai thinking, and it is frequently asserted that one of the causes of the coup was to make sure that Thaksin and his allies were out of power when the succession came. But it is also widely mooted that the next king, the present Crown Prince, is in some ways supportive of Thaksin. If this is the case, then the network monarchy itself might seem a challenge to traditional elite interests.

The strong state created by the present junta may thus mark a very fundamental departure in Thai politics—the end of the traditional bureaucratic polity, the demise of the Thaksin electorally-based, prime-minister-led polity, and perhaps the reduction in the influence of the network monarch.

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