

RESEARCHERS AT SINGAPORE'S INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES SHARE THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF CURRENT EVENTS

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## **Thailand Has Entered the Interregnum<sup>1</sup>**

*By Patrick Jory\**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- The concentration of power in the hands of PM Gen. Prayut Chan-ocha and the NCPO, the high level of repression, the widespread censorship and heavy propaganda, are signs not of strength but of the weakness of the current military regime.
- The health of the King and Queen appears to be in decline. The reign of the King is coming to an end and the succession is imminent.
- Thailand has entered an “interregnum” phase. The political situation is much more uncertain, unstable, and fluid than it appears. The *lèse majesté* law, which prevents discussion of the monarchy at this crucial time, distorts the true political situation.
- The objectives of the military regime and its supporters are the same as after the 2006 coup, which are, to destroy Thaksin Shinawatra and his support base and to neutralize the threat that electoral politics poses to the domination of the royalist bureaucracy symbolically led by the King.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a revised version of a paper presented for the Southeast Asian Studies Group, Griffith Asia Institute, Griffith University, Queensland, Australia, 19 September 2014.

- Given its weakness and the political uncertainty surrounding the imminent succession, it is unlikely the regime will succeed in achieving these objectives.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Much of the commentary on the military dictatorship that seized power in Thailand on May 2014 has focussed on the concentration of power in the hands of General Prayut Chan-ocha and the NCPO junta, and on the high level of repression. This suggests that Thailand's military junta and the royalist forces that support it are planning a root-and-branch "reform" of Thai politics that will ensure their long-term domination of the country.

This article submits that on the contrary, the royalist forces that have long dominated Thai politics are acting from a position of weakness. This weakness is evidenced partly by heavy media censorship and propaganda, and in particular by the use of the *lèse majesté* law, which prevents discussion of the issue at the heart of the political conflict—the monarchy. The core reason for this weakness is that the reign of King Bhumibol is almost over.

Thailand has in effect entered a period of interregnum. Political forces on both sides in the conflict are now manoeuvring in preparation for the imminent succession.

## **CLASH OF POLITICAL LEGITIMACIES**

Two quotes circulating in Thailand's social media, one by former Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, and the other by the current leader of the junta and Prime Minister, Gen. Prayut Chan-ocha, nicely capture the difference in thinking of the two sides to the conflict.

The first quote comes from Yingluck's Facebook wall two weeks before the May 22 coup, when her government was resisting enormous pressure to resign amidst rumours of an impending military intervention:

I have been working for two years, nine months and two days. Every minute of that time I have been proud that I was carrying out my duty as an elected Prime Minister according to the democratic system. I will stand by the side of the people forever.

The second quote is from a speech given in August by Gen. Prayut to his handpicked National Assembly in which he presented the budget bill:

In the name of His Majesty the King... royal power [was presented] to us; today who among us considers this? From the point of view of the government, you are using the three powers [*ie. legislative, executive and judicial power*] which belong to Him. The power does not belong to you. You do not receive this power when you are elected. It is power that comes from His Majesty the King. His Majesty presented this power to us to form the government. Today, the power that I have was presented to me by the King.

They express two diametrically opposed ways of understanding political legitimacy: one, that power comes from the people through elections, and that elections are the source of political legitimacy; the other, that power is presented to the people by the King, and that political legitimacy comes from the King. In essence the political conflict today remains the same as it was prior to the previous coup in September 19, 2006. Thaksin and his political parties, and more generally the system of electoral politics, are seen as a threat to what the American political scientist Fred Riggs referred to as the “bureaucratic polity” that has dominated Thailand since the late 1950s: that is, a state dominated by the military and the public sector, and which is legitimized by the King and the royal family.<sup>2</sup>

## THE CRISIS OF THE BUREAUCRATIC POLITY

Central to understanding Thailand’s political conflict is the institution of the bureaucracy. In Thai, the term for civil servant is *kha ratchakan*, which literally means “servant of the king”. The term *kha ratchakan*, therefore, in fact means the opposite of a “civil servant”, who serves the public. The reason is that Thailand’s modern bureaucracy was established in the days of the Absolute Monarchy in the late nineteenth century, when bureaucrats literally were, “servants of the king”. The bureaucracy expanded greatly in the 1950s and 1960s,<sup>3</sup> when the monarchy, politically sidelined since 1932, was restored under a military dictatorship to its central position in the Thai polity. Today, Thailand’s bureaucrats number about 2 million people, out of a population of 67 million. It’s important to understand that the military are also *kha ratchakan* – “*kha ratchakan thahan*”. They represent the armed wing of this royal bureaucracy. The *kha ratchakan* tend to be extremely royalist, but their political stance is also influenced by important economic changes.

Over the last 30 or 40 years the country has experienced rapid economic development.

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<sup>2</sup> Fred W. Riggs, *Thailand: the Modernization of a Bureaucratic Polity* (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1966).

<sup>3</sup> Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thailand: Economy and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 287-8.

The private sector has expanded greatly, and salaries and conditions in the private sector have improved significantly compared to the public sector. In recent years the government has tried to shrink the public sector and to make it more competitive, for example by offering financial incentives to government officials to retire early. During his tenure as Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra was particularly proactive in trying to increase the competitiveness of the public sector by creating a managerial culture with performance targets (for example, his promotion of the concept of “CEO Governors” – which was abandoned by the regime installed after the 2006 coup). At the same time, Thaksin was seen to be offering welfare to the lower classes, which the elite saw as being motivated purely by the desire to buy political support. This differential treatment enraged many in the public sector.

As a broad generalization, in recent years the *kha ratchakan* have felt embattled. Although the service mentality and efficiency of Thailand’s public sector are much stronger now than in the past, many still hold to the idea that their function is to carry out the King’s will. Indeed, the top levels of the public sector – the military leadership, the permanent secretaries of departments, senior judges of the judiciary, and university presidents – almost see themselves as modern-day courtiers presiding over a giant court society, dispensing the royal benevolence to the King’s loyal subjects. By and large, the *kha ratchakan* are vehemently anti-Thaksin, vote for the royalist Democrat Party, and many joined the protests to oust Thaksin back in 2005-6, 2008, and again in 2013-14.

## **WHY THE POLITICAL CONFLICT HAS INTENSIFIED**

### *The Economic Argument*

According to this argument, Thailand’s rapid economic growth since the 1960s has created an increasingly prosperous lower class. Many parts of the Thai countryside that were impoverished in the 1960s and had been recruiting grounds for the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), have been transformed. Now, one can see farmers driving new utility trucks, and in rural villages newly-built modern-style bricks and mortar houses are interspersed among the old bamboo or wooden houses with thatched roofs. Local business is thriving. To call them “farmers” is not quite correct either. Many of them have small businesses, work seasonally in Bangkok or have some other non-farming source of income. In addition to this, millions of poorer Thais have worked overseas as labourers in the booming economies of East Asia and the Middle East. They have a sophisticated understanding of the modern economy and modern politics, and are increasingly cosmopolitan. Many rural households have access to satellite TV and increasingly the internet, and some have been able to send their children to university. Like the urban middle class before them, this aspirational rural class – comprising over half the population – now wants political representation. Under Thaksin they got it for the first time, and having tasted that empowerment, they are unlikely to have the Bangkok elite force a return to the old status quo. The economic rise of this rural class has been well-

documented in recent academic studies.<sup>4</sup>

### *The Political Argument*

According to this argument, Thaksin was one of the first to see the political potential of creating a party that would respond to the aspirations of this class, which constitutes a majority of the national electorate. His electoral platform of cheap health care, village development funds, debt alleviation for farmers, accelerated local development, and other policies designed to appeal to this class was immensely popular. In the sixth elections since 2001, pro-Thaksin parties have won every one overwhelmingly. That is an extraordinary feat, considering everything that has been thrown at the pro-Thaksin supporters – coups, dissolutions of their political parties, judicial interventions, the detainment, imprisonment and exile of their leaders, and the killings of over 90 Red Shirt demonstrators and the injuring of thousands more in 2010. Thaksin's opponents eventually came to the conclusion that it would be impossible to defeat his party in an election, and thus came to see him as a mortal threat to the continued political dominance of the “bureaucratic polity” nominally led by the monarchy. To sum up the Political Argument, this conflict is not just about Thaksin, but about the entry of the masses into politics for the first time in Thai history.

### *The Succession Argument*

The Succession Argument is an extension of the Political Argument, and has been discussed at length publicly by the journalist, Andrew MacGregor Marshall.<sup>5</sup> The King came to the throne in 1946, making him not only the world's longest reigning monarch but also the world's longest serving head of state. The end of his reign is a once-in-a-century event. It is likely to radically change the political status quo. Two brief examples illustrate why this is the case: (1) all leadership appointments in the military are ultimately approved by the Privy Council, a powerful advisory council personally handpicked by the King. It is through this procedure that the monarchy has maintained a high degree of influence, if not control, over the military; (2) as is now well-known, the King is the wealthiest monarch in the world. The Crown Property Bureau, over which (according to the Crown Property Bureau Act of 1948) the King legally has total control,<sup>6</sup> managing assets worth around \$US41 billion.<sup>7</sup> His successor will, therefore, inherit this immense political and economic power. Given the King's advanced age and poor health, the succession is inevitably drawing closer.

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Andrew Walker, *Thailand's Political Peasants: Power in the Modern Rural Economy* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2012), and Charles Keyes', *Finding their Voice: Northeastern Villagers and the Thai State* (University of Washington Press, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Andrew MacGregor Marshall, *A Kingdom in Crisis: Thailand's Struggle for Democracy in the Twenty-First Century* (Zed Books, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Porphant Ouyyanont, “The Crown Property Bureau in Thailand and the crisis of 1997”, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 38:1 (2008) pp. 170-1.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

He struggled through his traditional birthday speech in December 2013, and recent pictures appear to show the King and Queen in poor health.

According to the Succession Theory, the designated successor to the throne, Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn, is deeply unpopular with the royalist elite and also lacks widespread popular support. He is believed, however, to be close to Thaksin. It is in Thaksin's long-term political interests to cultivate a close relationship with the successor to the throne, while the Crown Prince needs Thaksin's electoral popularity due to the hard-line opposition to him within the royalist elite.<sup>8</sup> The existential fear on the part of diehard royalists is that Vajiralongkorn coming unto the throne in alliance with Thaksin would represent their final defeat. In their eyes, Thaksin would then control not only a majority of the electorate but the monarchy as well. Their survival, therefore, depends on doing everything possible to stop Vajiralongkorn becoming king. Their candidate for the succession appears to be Princess Sirindhorn, whose public image has been carefully cultivated for many years and who not only enjoys greater popularity than her brother but is favoured by the royalist Establishment. The princess has figured quite prominently in the military regime's propaganda. A constitutional amendment in the 1970s makes it possible for a princess to ascent to the throne. Importantly, according to provisions in the Constitution regarding the succession (which are retained in the new interim constitution),<sup>9</sup> whoever controls the National Assembly is in a crucial position for influencing the succession.<sup>10</sup> So according to this theory, the May 2014 coup was a pre-emptive strike by the arch-royalists to seize control of the National Assembly before the imminent demise of the King, in order to prevent Vajiralongkorn succeeding to the throne.

This theory is, of course, highly sensitive and cannot be discussed openly due to the *lèse majesté* law. Nor indeed can it be proven. Circumstantially, however, it accounts for the extreme measures taken by Thaksin's enemies in carrying out the coup, the subsequent high level of repression, and the acute sensitivity towards any discussion of the monarchy and its future.

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<sup>8</sup> See "WikiLeaks cables: Thai leaders doubt suitability of prince to become king," *The Guardian*, 16 December 2010

<<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/dec/15/wikileaks-thailand-royal-succession-prince>>

<sup>9</sup> รัฐธรรมนูญแห่งราชอาณาจักรไทย (ฉบับชั่วคราว) พุทธศักราช ๒๕๕๗ [Interim Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, 2014] p. 3

<<http://www.ratchakitcha.soc.go.th/DATA/PDF/2557/A/055/1.PDF>>

<sup>10</sup> The approval of the National Assembly is required if the Privy Council appoints a Regent (if the King has not himself appointed a Regent); if the King wishes to amend the Palatine Law on the succession; or if the Privy Council submits the name of the successor (if the King has not himself named a successor); see รัฐธรรมนูญแห่งราชอาณาจักรไทย พ.ศ. ๒๕๕๐ มาตรา ๑๙ มาตรา ๒๒ มาตรา

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### *The Religious-Moral Argument*

The *Religious-Moral Argument* is less well understood but equally important. It helps explain the irrational, visceral hatred of Thaksin and his lower-class supporters on the part of sections of the conservative Establishment, as well as the royalist aversion for electoral democracy. The propaganda machine of the Thai state promotes a Theravada Buddhist version of the theory of divine monarchy. In this theory, the king is portrayed as a *bodhisatta*, a morally almost perfect being, who is on the path to enlightenment as a Buddha in a future incarnation. The king's status as *bodhisatta* implies that he has a greater store of "merit" (*bunbarami*) than any other being in the kingdom, due to the virtuous deeds that he had performed in previous incarnations. According to the doctrine of *kamma*, one's social status is a function of one's store of merit. The king possesses the greatest store of merit, and therefore he has the supreme political status in the kingdom. The princes and princesses, the aristocracy and nobility, pious merchants, and ascetic monks, also have substantial stores of merit, hence their enjoyment of high social status. The peasantry and slaves, by contrast, have a very low store of merit, because of "unskilful actions" (*kam*) they have committed in previous incarnations. Hence, their low status in the social order.

The social hierarchy thus reflects a kind of moral hierarchy: the "good" people are at the top and the "bad" people at the bottom.

In Thailand's feudal society, this was the religious justification for the social order. The end of the absolute monarchy, and the political ascendancy of democracy was a revolutionary blow to this idea. From this Buddhist perspective, the notion that the right to rule comes from the people meant the handing over of power to the morally impure, while taking power away from the being who in theory was the summit of moral perfection, the *bodhisatta*-king.

The absolute monarchy ended in 1932, and Thailand has since undergone great social and economic change. Today, ideas of status and morality are influenced by discourses other than religion. Nevertheless, this idea continues to be influential, perhaps subconsciously, among the Thai elite and especially the *kha ratchakan* – the bureaucracy. As McCargo has observed, it has helped create a kind of "hidden caste society" in Thailand<sup>11</sup>, which contributes to a very powerful idea among royalists today that Thailand needs to be ruled by "good men" (*khon di*), and that democratic rule leads to corruption – because the poor people are too ignorant to understand politics, and they sell their vote to corrupt politicians.

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<sup>11</sup> Duncan McCargo, 'The Thai Malaise', *Foreign Policy*, February 18, 2014 <[http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/02/18/the\\_thai\\_malaise](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/02/18/the_thai_malaise)>

## CONCLUSION

For all these reasons – the model of bureaucratic governance the military regime is trying to restore, the rise of an aspirational rural class as a result of irreversible socio-economic change, the inevitability that this new class will require political representation, and most important of all, the imminent succession, which will shake the political, economic, and religious-moral edifice that has been constructed around the King since he came to the throne in 1946 – it would be unwise to expect the military regime to achieve its plans for long-term “reform”.

The regime also has to contend with a drastically weakening economy. Thailand’s GDP is expected to grow a mere 1.5% this year, the lowest among the ASEAN countries. It has few friends internationally, and its apparent turn to China for support risks alienating the US, the EU, and Japan, Thailand’s most important international partners.

All this points to the fact that Thailand is now in the midst of an interregnum. For comparisons we might look to Indonesia in the dying days of the New Order regime, or perhaps China in the last days of Mao. In both cases a period of heightened repression took hold as the conservative old guard clung to power, prior to sweeping political change.

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