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COVID-19 in Thailand: The Securitization of a Non-traditional Threat

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Thai authorities regard the outbreak of COVID-19 as a non-traditional security threat that requires extraordinary measures — or, in a word, ‘securitization’.
- Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha declared a state of emergency in accordance with the 2005 Royal Decree on the Administration of Emergency Situations, allowing him to exercise special powers to address the situation. Bypassing popularly elected politicians in the coalition government, the government also created a special operating structure for bureaucrats and security officials.
- The government has been forced to reallocate budgetary resources for the crisis, to support medical workers who have run out of personal protective equipment. The military has had to cut its budget for conventional defence to divert money to the struggle against COVID-19.
- The draconian Emergency Law and extraordinary measures have caused collateral damage in the country, as officials misjudge situations and enforce the law without flexibility.
- For the sake of good governance, recourse to the normal parliamentary process to map out an exit strategy is recommended.

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INTRODUCTION

On 25 March 2020, or 72 days after an elderly traveller from the Chinese city of Wuhan was confirmed as the first case in Thailand of a person infected with the coronavirus later known as COVID-19, Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha declared a state of emergency. This declaration put his government into crisis-management mode to cope with one of the great pandemics in world history.

“For weeks and months from now, our beloved Thailand will face danger and hard times. This is a challenge that we have never foreseen. The worsening situation will have a severe impact on our health, incomes and way of life. As prime minister, I need to take charge and step up tough measures to stop the outbreak and ease its hard impact on the economy.”¹

Like many other countries around the globe, Thailand regards the deadly virus outbreak as a non-traditional security threat with the potential to harm people, affect human and social security, and do economic damage. This kind of threat is neither new nor unique to the world, to the region or to Thailand. Viruses causing human respiratory illness have attacked the world since early in the twenty-first century, when Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) emerged in China in 2003 and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) appeared in Saudi Arabia in 2012.

Thailand is likely to have been well aware of this kind of security threat, as it addressed the issue in its latest four year national security plan, released in November 2019. Even Prime Minister Prayut himself wrote a thesis on new security threats in 2007 proposing a strategy to deal with them.² But the government seems to have underestimated the COVID-19 threat and to have initially mishandled the situation.

From the perspective of the Copenhagen School’s theory of securitization,³ this paper examines the actions, steps and measures taken by Prayut’s government to deal with the disease that has killed tens, weakened thousands of people and dramatically damaged the Thai economy.

THE SECURITIZATION OF COVID-19

Generally, the securitization theory emphasizes “the critical role of the speech act in framing an issue as an existential threat to a referent’s survival and well-being. The purpose of speech is to convince an audience about an existential threat and construct an inter-subjective understanding within and among constituencies about the implication of a particular threat and to agree on the necessary policies and emergency measures needed to address it.”⁴

While the act of speech is the essence of securitization, the theory notes the steps taken to deal with a securitized threat. They are identification of existential threats, emergency actions and the effects on inter-unit relations resulting from authorities’ breaking free of

rules or constraints.⁵ Mely Caballero-Anthony and Lina Gong further suggest that securitization is a process, and it will succeed if a government—particularly that of a democratic country—obtains public acceptance and support for certain policies and measures.⁶

At an early stage in the current coronavirus pandemic, ministers and senior officials of the Thai government sent confusing messages about the virus to the public. Deputy Prime Minister and Public Health Minister Anutin Charnvirakul said on 22 January—a day before Wuhan locked down—that he had instructed the medical service across the country to prepare for an emergency and to maintain close surveillance and enforce a screening process at international airports. While the World Health Organization (WHO) had confirmed the first case of the disease in Thailand on 13 January,⁷ Anutin told a press conference more than a week later that there were no reports of human-to-human transmission of the novel coronavirus in Thailand. He further urged the public to have confidence in the national healthcare service. “Thailand has taken all measures in accordance with the WHO and it has received praise for efficient and transparent management, including its exemplary presentation of data and information,” he said.⁸

To build up more confidence in government measures, Anutin took visible action by inspecting the virus checkpoint at Bangkok’s Suvarnabhumi Airport and personally handing face masks to travellers. But these actions proved counterproductive, as he was miffed when Western visitors turned down the masks that he tried to hand them. In the meantime, the public began to express disappointment with what it considered the government’s slow and ineffective response to the outbreak.⁹

What led to frustration, worry and anger among members of the public was the fact that Thailand stayed open for foreign visitors, notably those from the Chinese epicentre, arriving for the purpose of tourism. People complained about the domestic shortage of facemasks. Meanwhile, the number of confirmed cases and deaths was rising. Furious social media users in Thailand bombarded the government with the hashtag #ratthabanhengsuai# (“crappygovernment”). The hashtag reached 400,000 uses on Twitter. This prompted Prime Minister Prayut to plead on live television on 27 January that the government had properly responded to the situation and given priority to the lives and the health of the people. The premier’s statement, however, failed to calm the public. Rather, he discredited himself by exaggerating in saying that his government had been well prepared and ready for an effective response to the outbreak since more than a month earlier.¹⁰ That would have been even before China reported the mysterious pneumonia of 41 patients to the WHO on 31 December 2019.

The first Thai national, a taxi driver without a history of travelling abroad, was confirmed to have COVID-19 on 31 January 2020.¹¹ The man appeared at a press conference at the Ministry of Public Health after his recovery five days later to tell the public that he received good treatment from the authorities.¹²

The government’s statements had trouble winning public support for lack of being backed by effective measures to tackle the virus. Prayut’s handling of the threat was a mess in

February and March, and it failed for a number of reasons to contain the spread of the virus. The former Army chief, who had seized power in a coup in 2014, was able neither to command the operation to cope with the outbreak nor to get the coalition parties in his government to act in concert. While Commerce Minister and Democrat Party leader Jurin Laksanawisit said on 30 January that Thailand had some 200 million facemasks available for domestic use, consumers and medical workers complained of shortage of both masks and hand sanitizers. The shortage of masks became a matter of controversy as the director-general of the Internal Trade Department Wichai Phochanakij filed a defamation suit against a spokesman for the Customs Department who disclosed that more than a million masks had been exported. The lawsuit was later withdrawn, however, as Wichai was transferred from his position to an inactive post for his failure to supply masks to the public and above all to medical workers; he later resigned from government service.

The military, directly under Prayut in his role as defence minister, also deserved blame for its defiance of the government's recommendation not to host crowded public gatherings. The Army-run Lumpinee Boxing Stadium became a major source of infections after dozens of boxing fans who attended the matches held on 6 March were confirmed positive for the virus and transmitted it to others. The organizer of the matches was Major General Rachit Arunrangsi, director-general of the Army Welfare Department. He was himself among the infected persons, after being present in the stadium to preside over the matches.¹³ While Prayut remained silent, Army chief General Apirat Kongsompong took action by ordering a probe into the controversial boxing matches.¹⁴

Prayut appeared on live television again on 16 March to deliver the message that Thailand could defeat the virus if the people can unite to fight together, but the public perceived his message somewhat differently. The premier, dressed in a khaki civil servant uniform, looked skinny and projected no optimism. At that time, Thailand had 147 confirmed cases of coronavirus and one death. Meanwhile, the public was debating whether the government should impose a lockdown to contain the ongoing outbreak. Northeastern Buriram province, a stronghold of the coalition-member Bhumjaithai Party of Health Minister Anutin, took the lead announcing a lockdown on 16 March. This was followed by many other provinces, including Uthai Thani, Nakhon Ratchasima and Bangkok before Prayut could make a clear decision on whether such measures should be stepped up for the entire nation.

STATE OF EMERGENCY

Confusion and panic buying took place following Bangkok Governor Aswin Kwanmuang's 21 March announcement of a partial lockdown to shut shopping malls in the capital.¹⁵ A government spokesperson added to the confusion in dismissing the report of a lockdown in the capital and said that the central government had not yet decided on locking Bangkok down. Aswin later called a press conference to confirm his order.¹⁶ And that created another chaotic situation as a large number of people who were suddenly free of work responsibilities in Bangkok travelled across Thailand to take shelter in their respective home provinces. They thus spread the disease throughout the country.

Finally, Prayut decided to declare a state of emergency effective between 26 March and 30 April, exercising special powers under the 2005 Royal Decree on the Administration of Emergency Situations to impose a curfew, shut down certain premises, prohibit the movement and crowded assembly of people, restrict the free flow of information, and close the borders.¹⁷ He addressed the country on live television as if he had staged another coup to seize power. He said that he would do his best to lead Thailand through the virus crisis. “Our beloved Thailand will be strong again. We fight together and win together”.¹⁸

The retired general was for the first time enforcing the emergency law for a non-military operation and to handle a disaster caused by disease transmission. In the past, the law was exercised mostly to accompany military operations to maintain order for security and for political purposes, such as in the restive South and during political protests in 2010 and 2014. Under the draconian law, Prayut was able to create and head an extraordinary operational structure known as the Center for COVID-19 Situation Administration (CCSA). He brought only senior bureaucrats — including the permanent secretaries of concerned ministries, the secretary-general of the National Security Council and the commander-in-chief of the Royal Thai Armed Forces — on board.¹⁹ The premier’s move bypassed the politicians who managed the relevant ministries with a popular mandate gained in the March 2019 elections, and furthermore centralized operations under his own authority. The emergency operation also highlighted the role of medical workers in fighting the pandemic, by commissioning physician Taweelap Visanuyothin as the principal spokesperson for the CCSA in order to avoid miscommunication and misinformation during the crisis.

In 2019, Thailand was the only middle-income country to score in the highest tier of the Global Health Security Index, receiving the sixth-highest overall score of 73.2 out of 100. It is also the only country from the WHO’s South-East Asia Region to rank in the top tier. Given its ability to identify and stop infectious diseases like MERS, the country has demonstrated an effective system for monitoring and tracking infections.²⁰ The Medical Council of Thailand reported as of the end of December 2019 that there were 58,556 medical doctors available for service, or one for every 1,178 of the country’s 69 million inhabitants.²¹ In addition to hundreds of thousands of professional medical workers, Thailand has more than one million healthcare volunteers across the entire nation. It has more than 155,000 hospital beds, a number sufficient for normal situations. In responding to the current crisis, Thammasat University opened a field hospital of 308 beds in March.²² However, the Ministry of Public Health admitted to shortages of some basic medical supplies, such as personal protective equipment and surgical masks for medical workers battling COVID-19 on the front lines.²³

While Southeast Asia’s second largest economy has sufficient resources and an adequate budget to deal with the disease outbreak, the government’s ability to mobilize and allocate its budget effectively is questionable. Of the 3.2 trillion baht national budget for 2020, only 26.7 billion baht was allocated to the Ministry of Public Health, less than one fourth of the 124.4 billion that went to the Ministry of Defense. The prime minister has 518 billion baht under his discretion, of which 96 billion baht are reserved for emergencies

such as natural disasters and disease outbreaks.²⁴ The government has now had to reallocate its budget, taking nearly 3.2 billion baht in the unused funds of 158 agencies to fight COVID-19.²⁵

The military, which claims prowess in crisis management, offered to cut its budget to allow the government to divert the money to tackle the new non-traditional threat. Army chief Apirat reportedly agreed to trim 30 percent of the force's budget and, notably, halted a 4.5 billion baht plan to purchase 50 Stryker armoured vehicles from the United States following public anger over the intention to purchase useless hardware during a health crisis.²⁶ The hashtag #yankrophong# ("damn your father's armoured vehicle") was tweeted nearly 600,000 times on 20 April as Army Ordnance Department's procurement document was leaked to the public, revealing the plan to buy the hardware.²⁷ The Navy also plans to adjust its budget but will continue payments on its submarine deal with China as planned.²⁸

CRIMES AND PUNISHMENT

While the state of emergency was declared with the aim of enforcing social distancing, tough actions such as the lockdown and curfew seriously affected people's way of life and their work.

The government imposed a curfew between 10 p.m. and 4 a.m. from 3 April onward after prosecuting 18 teenagers for gathering at a drinking and drugs party at a pier on the bank of the Chaophraya River in Ayutthaya Province on 2 April. They were sentenced to one to four months in jail on the charge of breaching the emergency law.²⁹ Many others have been arrested and prosecuted since then for violating the curfew and the emergency law by opening entertainment venues, and by gathering for sporting and gambling events. Some cases ended in tragedy, such as that of the taxi driver found unconscious, and perhaps already dead, in his cell at a police station in Sisaket Province after his arrest for violating the curfew on 7 April. He was declared dead the next day at a hospital. It is not yet known if the respiratory problems that lead to his demise were related to COVID-19.³⁰ Also, a village headman shot dead a layman and a Buddhist monk in the southern province of Surat Thani after the arrest of the two for breaking the curfew. He claimed self-defence for a crime he committed while performing his official duty.³¹ Law enforcement activities in Thailand are sometimes conducted without proper judgement, and a number of people were arrested in Bangkok for handing out food and sanitizers to people in need, as police said such gatherings might spread the deadly virus.³² Instead of helping out, the police prosecuted the donors. In fact, the authorities prosecuted 21,426 people during 3-30 April for violating the emergency law, according to the Office of the Attorney General.³³

Social distancing is an effective means of preventing the rapid spread of disease, but it also has strong side effects. The measures had a negative impact on the economy and on people's incomes. The International Monetary Fund reported that COVID-19 had affected Thailand's important tourism and manufacturing-exporting sectors particularly hard. The

Bank of Thailand is currently projecting a 5.3 percent contraction in economic activity in 2020.

The situation appeared to be about to improve, as a slower pace of newly confirmed cases and lower mortality were seen in late April. Prayut's government planned an exit strategy to rehabilitate the country and restart its sluggish economy, but it decided to extend the state of emergency, night curfew, restrictions on people's assembly and movement, and closure of Thailand's borders until the end of May for fear of a second-wave outbreak.³⁴

Prayut preferred exercising special executive powers to following normal parliamentary processes. He issued three royal decrees to borrow a total of 1.9 trillion baht in April to fight COVID-19 and for rehabilitation and restoration of the economy, even though the opposition called for the government to adopt these plans through the parliamentary process. While the constitution authorizes the government to issues decrees in case of urgency and emergency, the MPs argued that people's representatives deserved participation in shaping the recovery plan for the sake of transparency and good governance.³⁵

CONCLUSION

The securitization of a non-traditional threat such as COVID-19 may be necessary for a government seeking to gain public support and cooperation and to legitimize extraordinary actions to cope with a crisis. In a democratic country, a government with a popular mandate has to rely primarily on "the speech act" to convince the public to offer support. In such a case, special powers are not necessary.

However, Prayut failed to employ the speech act to gain cooperation from the Thai people because of his personal shortcomings as a public communicator and bad politics within his coalition government. The ex-commander Prayut in fact is familiar with exercising special powers to govern in the face of security threats during a crisis. The necessity for and effectiveness of some measures to prevent disease transmission, such as the night-time curfew, have been questioned. Effective social distancing could have been enforced by means of regular laws or a social campaign. Enforcing the draconian Emergency Law also caused collateral damage, such as the death of a layman and monk in the South. Many people faced unnecessary legal actions simply because they wanted to hand out food to hungry countrymen.

The pandemic does call for unusual measures. But this could create a "new normal" that left the government more familiar with abnormal measures than regular ones. This paper suggests the de-securitization of non-traditional threats and a reliance on existing institutions for threat management in the future, and doing this in a way that is friendly to democracy, society and the economy.

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- ² “Cho ngan wichai ‘Prayut’ adit naksueksa wittthayalai pongkan ratcha-anachak phu khrunkhit rueang phaikhukham rupbaep mai” [Showing Prayut’s research as a student at the National Defense College who thought about new security threats], *Way Magazine*, 30 January 2020 (<https://waymagazine.org/crisis-management-prayut/>, accessed 22 April 2020).
- ³ Securitization theory is proposed by Ole Wæver, an international-relations scholar at the University of Copenhagen and one of the main architects of the Copenhagen School of International Relations.
- ⁴ Mely Caballero-Anthony and Lina Gong, “Beyond securitization: Governing NTS issues in Southeast Asia”, pp.1-27 in *Non-Traditional Security Issue in ASEAN: Agendas for Action*, edited by Mely Caballero-Anthony and Lina Gong (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2020), p.5.
- ⁵ Rita Taureck, “Securitization theory and securitization studies”, *Journal of International Relations and Development* 9 (2006): 53-61.
- ⁶ Caballero-Anthony and Gong, op cit.
- ⁷ “World Health Organization statement on novel coronavirus in Thailand”, news release of 13 January 2020 (<https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/13-01-2020-who-statement-on-novel-coronavirus-in-thailand>, accessed 23 April 2020).
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- ⁹ “Anutin steamed as farang turn down facemasks”, *The Nation Thailand*, 7 February 2020 (<https://www.nationthailand.com/news/30381769>, accessed 23 April 2020).
- ¹⁰ “Khorona: Prayut ok thiwi chaeng chiwit lae sukkhaphap prachachon samkhan thisut lang yot phu siachiwit nai chin phoem pen 80 rai” [Prayut on live television to say that lives and wellbeing of people are most important as death toll in China rises to 80], *BBC Thai*, 27 January 2020 (<https://www.bbc.com/thai/international-51259994>, accessed 23 April 2020).
- ¹¹ “Khorona: satharanasuk thalaeng phop kantitchuea wairat khorona saiphan mai nai prathet rai raek pen khon khaptaksi” [Public health ministry confirms Thai taxi driver as the first case of Thai national infected with new virus], *BBC Thai*, 31 January 2020 (<https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-51321489>, accessed 23 April 2020).
- ¹² “Poetchai taksi tit khoronawairat lang haipuai wan raek ko rusuek kangwon” [Recovered cabbie shows up in public saying he is worried], *Krungthep thurakit*, 5 February 2020 (<https://www.bangkokbiznews.com/news/detail/865093>, accessed 23 April 2020).
- ¹³ “Army welfare chief has virus, 60 quarantined”, *Bangkok Post*, 16 March 2020 (<https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1879925/army-welfare-chief-has-virus-60-quarantined>, accessed 23 April 2020).
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¹⁶ “Chatchen laeo Aswin yuenyan ko tho mo sang pit hang 22 wan” [It’s clear, Bangkok Metropolitan Authority confirms shopping malls shut down for 22 days], *Than setthakit*, 21 March 2020 (<https://www.thansettakij.com/content/425775>, accessed 23 April 2020).

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