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“We are Independent Trolls”: The Efficacy of Royalist Digital Activism in Thailand

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Royalist activists wearing minion costumes to report violations to Article 112 at a police station in Thailand. Source: <https://prachatai.com/journal/2021/07/93916> (photo used with permission).

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Alongside protracted political conflicts offline, Thailand has witnessed information warfare between pro- and anti-establishment forces. This struggle has been asymmetrical in terms of institutional resources and bureaucratic networks.
- Pro-establishment forces tap into and consolidate the residual infrastructures of the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC). Its psychological Information Operations (IOs), which can be traced back to the counter-communism campaigns of the 1960s, have recently been revamped in the face of the Southern insurgency and of political conflicts in Bangkok.
- Despite extensive IOs by the ISOC, some experts argue they have not gained substantive traction. This assessment, however, overlooks the interaction between official IOs and decentralised influence campaigns carried out by royalist media and civic groups.
- These royalist outlets and civic groups engage in a multi-tiered strategy. Pro-regime media monitor the opposition's social media feeds and use these to create content that highlight opposition threats to the status quo.
- Their digital activism also includes online petitions and offline mobilisation that have had a tangibly detrimental impact on the opposition beyond mere contestation over narratives.
- Beyond organised activism, ordinary royalists defend the crown against 'nation-haters' on Twitter. By self-identifying themselves as 'independent IOs', digital royalists aid the regime's online surveillance, censorship and legal harassment against those deemed threatening to the establishment. The role of these actors reinforces the ecosystem of digital repression.

INTRODUCTION

Thailand has undergone information warfare. From red shirts active in the 2010s¹ to youth protesters who took to the street in 2020 and 2021,² anti-establishment forces have used social media platforms to challenge the legitimacy of ruling elites and their ideology. Meanwhile, the security establishment has allocated a massive budget and human resources to psychological Information Operations (IOs) to counteract the opposition. The IO troops have allegedly engaged in campaigns to manipulate online narratives that are favourable to the regime and unfavourable to the opposition. The focus on military IOs has led many to over-speculate about the extensive impact of regime-organised information manipulation efforts. In March 2020 and August 2021, for instance, the opposition Move Forward Party expressed concerns about the government's allocation of budget to IOs which have the effect of exacerbating the country's political divide.³ A common perception is that every anti-opposition troll on Twitter or Facebook originates from the military IOs.

However, this assumption is only half the story. This paper examines the complex intersection of: 1. regime-organised cyber troops; 2. pro-regime media outlets, and royalist activists. Unlike the first group, the pro-regime press and royalist civic groups are not necessarily sponsored by the regime, but are instead ideologically driven to defend the crown. This seems to also be the case for many ordinary Twitter users whose account profiles and digital behaviours suggest a bottom-up, unorganised pattern of influence activities against anti-establishment supporters. This plethora of actors engage in a multi-tiered strategy, from content reposting and flagging to offensive commenting. The dynamics of royalist activism run parallel with anti-establishment activism online and offline.

Royalist digital activism may have limited traction, assessed from its small social media following. But the activism is impactful and detrimental to the opposition fundamentally because royalist digital repertoires work in tandem with other digital repression tactics of the regime, especially 'lawfare' (the abuse of draconian laws against dissidents). For example, these activists tend to monitor online dissent and report this to the authorities, who will then file lawsuits against dissidents. Royalist digital activism is accordingly a constitutive part of ongoing digital repression in Thailand.

REGIME EFFORTS AT SOCIAL MANIPULATION

Thailand's protracted conflicts between supporters of two competing political orders – royal nationalism and democracy – characterises the ongoing information warfare. Both pro- and anti-establishment supporters propagated their agenda initially through traditional media such as TV and radio programmes, but from 2006 onwards, the Internet (first web blogs and later social media) has become the new battleground.⁴ As monarchy-related scandals and criticisms are increasingly shared on YouTube, Facebook, and more recently Twitter, the authorities have responded with an array of digital repression tactics. State agencies – such as the Royal Thai Police's Cyber Crime Investigation Bureau, the Anti-Fake News Center affiliated with the Ministry of Digital Economy and Society and the Army's Cyber Centre – have systems to surveil online activities effectively.⁵ Once these agencies flag subversive online content, they may block it and/or pursue legal repression. Existing laws such the

Computer-Related Crime Act (enacted in 2007 and amended in 2016), Article 112 and Criminal Code, Sections 326 to 333 on defamation, have been abused to stifle anti-establishment supporters with multiple charges.⁶ These mechanisms of censorship and surveillance are carried out in tandem with official efforts to influence narratives in social media.

To be sure, regime efforts at content manipulation are old wine in new bottles. The tactic was extensively used in the 1960s-70s counter-communist insurgency in which the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) engaged in psychological Information Operations (IO) campaigns under the Thai Army's command. Renamed in 1974, the ISOC morphed from the Central Security Command that was established in 1962 and become the Communist Suppression Operations Command in 1965. The ISOC's role waned as communist threats faded in the late 1980s. But since 2006, the ISOC and its nationwide paramilitary units have been reinvigorated in response to recurring Southern Thailand insurgency and anti-establishment challenges in Bangkok.⁷ In conjunction with the police's cyber monitoring programmes, the ISOC allegedly hosts 19 to 40 cyber units⁸ comprising over 1,000 rank-and-file army personnel, and possibly high school students, in the Territorial Defence Command.⁹ Each unit comprises about five personnel who spend at least one hour per day influencing social media content. As of 2020, IO units reportedly received basic training workshops about social media content creation and a lump sum of 1,500 Thai Baht (around US\$45) per month.¹⁰ In 2021, some public relations start-ups were allegedly contracted to improve the quality of IO campaigns.¹¹ The 2020 annual budget for IOs can be up to 3.7 billion Thai Baht (about US\$110 million).¹²

IO campaigns are generally classified as "black", "white", and "grey," implying social media messaging to directly attack or devalue (*doi kha*) the opposition, commend the regime and provide partisan information, respectively.¹³ One IO trooper usually runs several social media accounts by using inauthentic identifications (e.g., using a stock or stolen avatar photo as an account image). IO troopers monitor the opposition figures or groups' social media feeds to get a sense of current contentious issues. They then respond by re-sharing flagged content but inserting new captions to counteract the opposition's original claims. In addition, troopers respond to anti-establishment posts in the authors' comment section. My preliminary survey of four accounts suspected to be IOs shows that these offensive comments often target Twitter accounts of opposition figures, including the exiled scholar Pavin Chachavalpongpun (@PavinKyoto), Phuea Thai politician Tosaporn Sererak (@Tsererak) and VoiceTV journalist Sirote Klampaipoon (@sirotek).¹⁴ Recent reports from Twitter and Facebook reveal the extent of military IOs on social media sites. In December 2020, Twitter took down 926 accounts linked to the Army.¹⁵ But the number of inauthentic Twitter accounts involved in "a large-scale information operation" during the 2020 anti-establishment protests could go up to 17,562.¹⁶ Later in March 2021, Facebook took down 185 accounts and groups with ties to the ISOC which exhibited "coordinated inauthentic behaviour."¹⁷ The Move Forward party has attributed 54,800 social media accounts to military IOs.¹⁸

Despite this breadth of institutionalised efforts to manipulate online information, experts, including those from the Stanford Internet Observatory (SIO), argue that official IOs are not always effective. According to an SIO report, of 926 accounts that Twitter took down in

2020, 471 accounts did not tweet at all, while 455 accounts produced only 21,385 tweets from 2015 to 2020. Engagements and followings of these accounts were also low; researchers conclude that regime-coordinated IOs are low-impact.¹⁹ However, this assessment is limited to counting the number of followers and engagements, while overlooking a political environment in which regime-organised influence campaigns proliferate. In Thailand, the impact of official IOs should be considered in conjunction with decentralised IO campaigns by royalist media and activists, and ultimately with the interaction between these diverse efforts of content manipulation and other aspects of digital repression.

THE ROYALIST MEDIA-ACTIVIST NEXUS

Thailand’s royalist media represents a crossover between traditional press and social media outlets that generate pro-government, pro-military and pro-monarchy ‘news’ content. Top News, for instance, exists as a TV channel, and simultaneously publishes news reports on its website, YouTube and Facebook Pages. Other pro-regime online mouthpieces such as The Mettad, Khao Sueak and The Truth, however, operate only in the form of websites and Facebook Pages by producing their own reports to accompany poster-like content visualisation. Particularly The Mettad and Khao Sueak had emerged as a satirical mimic of pro-democracy news sites such as The Matter and Khao Sod. They later developed readership among royalist, pro-regime communities and morphed into news blogs. Although some analysts speculate that the regime that is currently led by Prayuth Chanocha may have funded or hired private companies to run these online publications,²⁰ at least Top News seems to have private sponsorships.²¹ The Mettad states on its Facebook page that its writers are mainly volunteers. The table below compares the number of fans and engagements in November 2021 across four main royalist platforms, with Top News having the most total fans and The Truth having the largest fan growth and most active engagement with its followers (via comments, shares and reactions). As with military IOs, these outlets produce content based on their monitoring of social media feeds of the opposition’ sites. Their ‘news’ reporting frames issues from the normative perspective of royal nationalism, thereby casting anti-establishment figures as unpatriotic and disloyal, as further detailed.

Page	Total fans	Fan growth	% Fans	Total posts	Total engagement
 THE TRUTH	72,691	2,224	3.06	745	110,152
 ชาวเสื้อ	13,864	159	1.15	4	2,403
 The METTAD	177,867	64	0.04	22	45,107
 TOP News	292,717	1,049	0.36	0	0

Figure 1: Fan numbers and online engagements of royalist outlets. Data on Top News’ total posts and total engagement do not appear in the analysis, most likely due to data discrepancy at the point of connecting to the analytics tool.

Source: ISEAS data

- Royalist news reports cater to demands and worldviews of royalist civic groups. The latter's digital activism in turn amplifies messages of pro-regime outlets. Contemporary and active royalist groups include:
- Thai Move Institute (สถาบันทิศทางไทย)
- Thailand Help Center for Cyber Bullying Victims (THCVC, ศูนย์ช่วยเหลือด้านกฎหมายผู้ถูกล่วงละเมิดทางสังคม)
- Rubbish Collection Organization (RCO, องค์กรเก็บขยะแผ่นดิน)
- Thai Bhakdi (ไทยภักดี)²²
- Monarchy Watchdog and Protection Network (เครือข่ายเฝ้าระวังและปกป้องสถาบัน)
- Citizen Group to Defend the Nation, the Monarchy and Buddhism (กลุ่มพสกนิกรปกป้องสถาบันชาติ ศาสน์ กษัตริย์)
- People Army's Network to Protect the Monarchy (เครือข่ายกองทัพประชาชนปกป้องสถาบัน)
- Vocational Students Helping the Country Group (VSHCG, อาชีวะช่วยชาติ)
- Coordination Centre of Vocational Students for the Protection of National Institutions (CVPI, อาชีวะปกป้องสถาบัน)
- Thai Raksa (ไทยรักษา)

Most of these groups have online presence in the form of Facebook pages that serve to amplify messages, facilitate digital activism and galvanise offline protest actions. As with military IOs and pro-regime outlets, royalist groups' pages base their content on what they gather from the social media feeds of anti-establishment figures, and repost these on the groups' Facebook pages. These page administrators also share news content retrieved from pro-regime outlets listed earlier, especially The Truth.

Beyond creating and sharing content, these different groups have seemingly collaborated in digital activism against certain campaigns or actions by the opposition. Recent online petitions such as #save112 and #AmnestyGetOut reflect this activist pattern. On 5 November 2021, the Progressive Movement (led by leading figures of the disbanded Future Forward Party) together with iLaw (legal and human rights NGO) and youth movements, launched the campaign to abolish Article 112 (offending the monarchy). Soon after, around 100,000 people signed the petition in support of this campaign.²³ On the same date, People Army's Network to Protect the Nation, the Monarchy and Buddhism submitted its own petition that was signed by around 200,000 citizens.²⁴ Simultaneously, the hashtag #save112 was seen widespread on Twitter to compete with the opposition hashtag, #abolish112. In a similar vein, on 21 November 2021, Amnesty International (AI) Thailand had shown solidarity with young activists charged with Article 112 on its website. The pro-regime outlet, The Truth, initially picked up on this and criticised the AI's statement on its Facebook Page. A few days later, the Thai Raksa group, the THCVC and other like-minded royalist groups gathered more than 500,000 signatures to pressure the authorities to 'evict' Amnesty International from Thailand. In parallel, the Twitter hashtag #AmnestyGetOut gained traction among royalists.



Figure 2: The (Amnesty International) ‘Get Out’ campaign poster retrieved from the Thai Raksa’s Facebook Page.

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/thraksa910/>

Royalist digital activism overlaps with offline activities to counter anti-establishment forces. Royalist groups detailed above have varying mandates. The Thai Move Institute is supposed to be a ‘think tank,’ thereby mostly involved in organising discussion panels and webinars. Meanwhile, the THCVC not only helps victims of alleged bullying actions by the opposition supporters but it also monitors social media posts considered to offend the royal family. They gather evidence for Article 112 lawsuits and submit this to the police.²⁵ The RCO shares some characteristics with the THCVC; it was founded in 2014 to surveil social media sites and file lawsuits against violators of Article 112. But regardless of their different missions, most royalist activists coalesce in organising street protests to push back against anti-establishment protests. A case in point was the occurrence of at least 120 royalist protests from July to December 2020 to deter opposition demonstrations.²⁶ The number peaked in mid-October 2020 when an anti-establishment activists’ gathering took place in parallel with the royal commemoration of King Rama IX’s death.²⁷ On the same date, the RCO and allies staged a counter protest which was equated with a fight against “national scum”²⁸

Apart from organised groups, ordinary citizens take to Twitter and Facebook to defend the crown against ‘nation-haters’ (*phuak chang-chaat*), a term coined by the Thai Bhakdi leader and former politician of the conservative Democrat Party, Warong Dejkijvikrom, to refer to anti-establishment supporters. In contrast to the assumption that royalists on Twitter are mostly regime-backed IOs, the reality is more complex and many royalists who troll the opposition online sometimes appear to be someone’s father, mother, sibling and teacher –

basically ordinary people who proudly endorse the opposition's derogatory labelling of them as 'minion' or *salim*.²⁹

These royalists who troll the opposition appear to be genuine accounts, rather than those manufactured for the purposes of IOs. A closer look into over 10,000 accounts that posted the hashtag #save112 and #AmnestyGetOut reveals that the characteristics of these users appear dissimilar to those usually associated with organised IOs. First, some accounts have been using Twitter since the early 2010s, way before regime-backed IO accounts were thought to have been created, most around 2020 and 2021.³⁰

Second, account profiles of 'independent IOs' seem to be markedly different from manufactured IO accounts. While organised troopers' Twitter handlers appear to comprise random alphabets (e.g., the handler of one account suspected to be IO is "@vbdP2KwUO8BtnL6"³¹), the accounts of those claiming to be 'independent' IOs use handlers that resonate with their real names or nicknames. This difference is also reflected in the profile pictures used: IO accounts mostly use a stock or stolen avatar photo as an account image. This is not the case for 'independent IOs' whose profile pictures seem to match their personal images posted together with non-political, lifestyle-based messages on their feeds.

Thirdly, IO accounts normally have between none to dozens of followers, while following hundreds of the opposition accounts. Their sole activity appears to be offensively commenting or retweeting these opposition figures' posts. However, ostensibly independent IOs tend to have hundreds and even thousands of followers with mixed professional and political backgrounds. Moreover, their tweets combine political and non-political content. (See images below). One caveat is that it remains difficult to assess the extent to which these independent IOs are linked to the regime beyond mere ideological associations. Future research using digital anthropology that observes behaviours of the so-called independent IOs over a long duration, in tandem with systematic Twitter analytics should address this aspect.³² For now, it looks like Thailand is facing a more diverse environment of influence activity than usually assumed.



Figure 3: A Tweet with #AmnestyGetout by a self-identified 'independent IO'

Source: ISEAS and Twitter data

CONCLUSION

What makes royalist digital activism effective is not the quantity of page followers or engagements, but rather its operation in tandem with other digital repression tools. Compared with the millions of followers in anti-establishment Facebook Pages such as Free Youth or Thalufah gain,³³ royalist pages such as The Mettad and The Truth, with their smaller number of followers, may be considered as having minimal traction. However, the politics of numbers matter less than a digital environment in which royalist digital activism is situated. Together with regime-organised IOs, royalist activism constitutes a mechanism of content influence that shapes pro-regime narratives, while potentially drowning out and sowing public doubt in the opposition movements in particular and democratic political order in general. This was particularly effective, for example, when organised and grassroots IO troopers relied on a royal nationalist rhetoric to frame the 2020 and 2021 protesters as nation-haters and anti-monarchists. Such framing has largely diverted public attention beyond monarchy reform to include addressing economic inequality and the government's ineffective responses to the pandemic. Royalist media's portrayal of protesters as vandals backed by western powers reinforces existing narratives that link democracy with disorder and external interference in Thai sovereignty.³⁴ In parallel with information manipulation, the regime employs a wide range of digital repression tactics such as surveillance, censorship and legal repression to control information distribution by dissidents. In particular, the weaponisation of draconian laws has so far disrupted anti-establishment activism.³⁵ Multiple charges that anti-establishment supporters face deters them from participating in political activities. What is more, the costs of legal threats may make people think twice about criticising the regime in digital space, thus effectively instilling self-censorship.³⁶

The interplay between organised and decentralised bottom-up IO campaigns completes the cycle of digital repression. Online vigilantism by pro-regime mouthpieces and royalist actors facilitates official surveillance and censorship by flagging subversive content and

reporting violations to the police. In this sense, draconian laws offer a meaningful activist path for royalist groups who diligently collect evidence and file lawsuits against those they deem disrespectful of the monarchy.

¹ Simon Montlake, “Thailand’s Red Shirts and Yellow Shirts Battle it out on Facebook.” *The Christian Science Monitor*, 24 May 2021 (<https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-Pacific/2010/0524/Thailand-s-red-shirts-and-yellow-shirts-battle-it-out-on-Facebook>, downloaded 12 December 2021).

² Janjira Sombatpoonsiri, “Thai 2021 Demonstrations: Losing Traction Online,” *Fulcrum: Analysis on Southeast Asia*, 26 October 2021 (<https://fulcrum.sg/thai-2021-demonstrations-losing-traction-online/>, downloaded 12 December 2021).

³ “เปิดไสลด์ สส.วิโรจน์อีกครั้ง เผลาหนเป็นเป้า บัญชีไหนเป็นหมาของ IO ทหาร” [MP Viroj’s PowerPoint Slides: Which pages are military IO’s targets], *Prachatai*, 3 March 2020 (<https://prachatai.com/journal/2020/03/86617>, downloaded 30 November 2021); “ไอโอ:

คณะก้าวหน้าเปิดโปงข้อมูลเครือข่ายปฏิบัติการข่าวสารกองทัพ [IO: Move Forward Movement Reveals Military’s IO Networks], *BBC News Thailand*, 20 December 2020 (<https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-55145803>, downloaded 30 November 2021).

⁴ Pirogrong Ramasoota, “Internet Politics in Thailand after the 2006 Coup: Regulation by Code and a Contested Ideological Terrain,” in *Access Contested: Security, Identity and Resistance in Asian Cyberspace*, edited by Ronald John et al. (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2012), 83-114.

⁵ Feldstein, Steven. *The Rise of Digital Repression: How Technology is Reshaping Power, Politics, and Resistance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021, 113-118. The Thai military has also allegedly purchased spyware from companies such as NSO / Circles, Bluecoat and Hacking Team. Analysts speculate that this could be used to streamline current state surveillance against dissidents. See Bill Marczak et al., “Running in circles: Uncovering the clients of cyberespionage firm circles,” The Citizen Lab, University of Toronto (<https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/106212/1/Report%23133--runningincircles.pdf>, downloaded 2 November 2021).

⁶ Janjira Sombatpoonsiri, “Securitization of Fake News: Policy Responses to Disinformation in Thailand,” in *From Grassroots Activism to Disinformation: Social Media in Southeast Asia*, eds. Aim Sinpeng and Ross Tapsell. Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2020, 105-125. See also Aim Sinpeng, “State Repression in Cyberspace: The Case of Thailand,” *Asian Politics & Policy* 5(3) (2013): 421-440; Lui Yangyue, “Transgressiveness, Civil Society and Internet Control in Southeast Asia,” *The Pacific Review* 27(3) (2014): 383-407; and Steven Feldstein, *The Rise of Digital Repression: How Technology is Reshaping Power, Politics and Resistance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 96-133.

⁷ Puangthong Pawakapan, *Infiltrating Society: The Thai Military’s Internal Security Affairs*. Singapore: ISEAS Yusof-Ishak Institute, 2021, 4.

⁸ An army’s leaked document identifies 19 military units active in IOs. However, in an early 2020 parliamentary session, an estimation of IO units could be up to 40 units. See, “เปิดไสลด์ สส.วิโรจน์อีกครั้ง” [MP Viroj’s PowerPoint Slides]; “ไอโอ” [IO]).

⁹ The Territorial Defense Command of the Defense Ministry offers a military training course for high school students. Upon completion after three to five years, graduating students are exempted from annual military conscriptions..

- ¹⁰ “ก้าวไกลเปิดฉากไอโอบั่นข้อความ 5.8 หมื่นบัญชี” [Move Forward MP Exposes 58,000 IO Accounts], *Isranews Agency*, 19 February 2021. (<https://www.isranews.org/article/isranews/96156-isranews-907.html>, downloaded 2 November 2021).
- ¹¹ “ไอโอ” [IO].
- ¹² “Opposition Alleges Army Behind Cyber Attacks on Critics, Holds PM responsible,” *ThaiPBS*, 26 February 2020 (<https://www.thaipbsworld.com/opposition-alleges-army-behind-cyber-attacks-on-critics-holds-pm-responsible/>, downloaded 2 November 2021).
- ¹³ “IOตัวจริงแหวกวงการไอโอ” (A real IO trooper exposes Information Operation system), เดือนทอล์ก [Thuean Talk], September 18, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BirmjL0xhK0>.
- ¹⁴ My thanks go to ISEAS MTS’s research officer, Amirul Adli Bin Rosli, for his assistance in detecting this pattern.
- ¹⁵ Josh A. Goldstein et al. “Cheerleading without Fans: A Low-Impact Domestic Information Operation by the Royal Thai Army,” *Stanford Internet Observatory*, 8 October 2020 (<https://stanford.app.box.com/v/202009-sio-thailand>, downloaded 24 June 2021).
- ¹⁶ Elise Thomas, Tracy Beattie and Albert Zhang, “#WhatsHappeningInThailand: The Power Dynamics of Thailand’s Digital Activism,” Australian Strategic Policy Institute, December 2020 (<https://www.aspi.org.au/report/whats-happening-in-thailand-power-dynamics-thailand-digital-activism>, downloaded 2 November 2021).
- ¹⁷ Patpicha Tanakasempipat, “Facebook removes Thai military-linked information influencing accounts,” *Reuters*, 3 March 2021 (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-facebook-thailand-idUSKBN2AV252>, downloaded 2 November 2021).
- ¹⁸ “ไอโอ” [IO]. The Move Forward Party is what remains from the Future Forward Party which was dissolved by the Constitutional Court’s ruling in February 2021. A dozen of its party leadership is banned from the election for ten years. However, figureheads such as Thanathorn Jungrungeungkij and Piyabutr Saengkanokkul remain active politically as founders of the Progressive Movement.
- ¹⁹ Josh A. Goldstein et al., “Cheerleading without Fans,” 3.
- ²⁰ Private conversations with Orapin Yingyongpathana, September 25, 2021; Sarinee Achavanuntakul, October 13, 2021.
- ²¹ This is gauged from the opposition’s campaign to ban products of companies that fund Top News. See “No Salim Shopping List,” *Trends Map*, 22 March 2021 (<https://www.trendsmap.com/twitter/tweet/1373914963677306881>, downloaded 30 November 2021).
- ²² The Thai Bhakdi Group became a political party in October 2021.
- ²³ “ล่าช้อกเลิก 112 วันเดียวทะลุแสน” [Petition to Abolish 112 Gets 100K in One Signatures in One Day], *Matichon Online*, 6 November 2021 (https://www.matichon.co.th/politics/news_3028918, downloaded 30 November 2021).
- ²⁴ The group is led by Buddha Isara, former figurehead of the People’s Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) whose mass demonstrations set the stage for the 2014 military coup. See “พุทธะอิสระยื่นขวน 2 แสนรายชื่อคัดค้านแก้ไข ม.112” [Buddha Isara Submits to Chuan a Petition against 112 Abolish Petition], *Thairat Online*, 6 November 2021, (<https://www.thairath.co.th/news/politic/223642>, downloaded 30 November 2021).
- ²⁵ “ปักหมุดแผนที่ 112 ปฏิบัติการประชาชนแจ้งความ” [Mapping Citizens’ Lawsuits against 112 Violators’], *VoiceTV Online*, 28 October 2021 (<https://voicetv.co.th/read/xZ3RycdV1>, downloaded 30 November 2021); “ชวนทำความเข้าใจกับข่าว 112 กว่าพันคน” [Introduce Auntie Naengnoi and THCVC that File Lawsuits against more than 1,000,112 Violators], *Prachatai*, 11 July 2021 (<https://prachatai.com/journal/2021/07/93916>, downloaded 30 November 2021).
- ²⁶ Own calculation based on the databases of the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Programme and Mobdata Thailand.

²⁷ As the motorcade carrying King Rama X's Queen Suthida and his 15-year-old son passed the protest site near the government house, protesters were seen flashing the three-finger salute – the resistance symbol – and chanted phrases such as ‘Reform the Monarchy’ and ‘My Taxes!’. See Rebecca Ratcliffe and Veena Thoopakrajae, “Thai Pro-democracy Protesters Confront Royal Visit to Bangkok,” *The Guardian*, 14 October 2020

(<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/14/thai-pro-democracy-protesters-confront-royal-visit-to-bangkok>, downloaded 12 December 2021).

²⁸ “หมอเหรีษญทองเคือด ปลุกกำลังมาล้อมกทม. รอสัญญาณเก็บขะแผ่นดิน” [Angry Rien Thong incites mob to surround Bangkok, wait for signals to collect scum of the land], *Thairath Online*, 14 October 2020, (<https://www.thairath.co.th/news/politic/1952926>, downloaded 30 November 2021).

²⁹ Minions are a character from a Pixar Studio's animation. Their bodies are yellow, which is also the birthday colour of King Rama IX whom royalists highly revere. Besides, minions are portrayed as a dull creature that tend to follow orders blindly, a trait that anti-establishment supporters often associate with royalists. *Salim* originally means a type of Thai sweet, but in light of political conflicts, it refers to royalists who are not ‘enlightened’ enough to understand that they are deceived and oppressed by the feudal elites.

³⁰ Josh A. Goldstein et al., “Cheerleading without Fans”; Elise Thomas et al., “#WhatsHappeningInThailand.”

³¹ See <https://twitter.com/vbdP2KwUO8BtnL6>.

³² See, for instance, Rongbin Han, *Contesting Cyberspace in China: Online Expression and Authoritarian Resilience* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018); Florian Scheinder, *China's Digital Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

³³ Free Youth and Thalufah are two of several youth groups that have led anti-establishment protests in 2020 and 2021. Free Youth Facebook Page has 2 million followers, while Thalufah Page has about 262,000 followers. See also Anusorn Unno, “‘Thalu Gas’: The Other Version of the ‘Thai Youth Movement,’ *ISEAS Perspective*, 2021/146 (<https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2021-146-thalu-gas-the-other-version-of-the-thai-youth-movement-by-anusorn-unno/>, downloaded 13 December 2021).

³⁴ The storyline that US and European organisations support anti-establishment movements to overthrow the monarchy has been around as early as since the 2014 coup. In light of the 2020 protests, this conspiracy idea has gained public traction. Royalist outlets and civic groups such as The Truth and the Thai Move Institute published a list of NGOs, activists and academics who were involved in the protests and who received funding from the US (see, for instance,

<https://www.facebook.com/thaimoveinstitute/posts/349743986408921/>). Mainstream media, including the moderate ThaiPBS, later picked up this narrative. See “Conspiracy theorists believe ‘invisible foreign hand’ behind Thai protests”, *ThaiPBS World*, 2 November 2020

(<https://www.thaipbsworld.com/conspiracy-theorists-belief-invisible-foreign-hand-behind-thai-protests/>, downloaded 2 November 2021). For further details about the online development of this conspiracy plot, see Janjira Sombatpoonsiri, “Manipulating civic space: Cyber trolling in Thailand and the Philippines.” *GIGA Focus Asia*, No. 3, 6/2018 (<https://www.giga-hamburg.de/en/publications/11574071-manipulating-civic-space-cyber-trolling-thailand-philippines/>, downloaded 30 November 2021).

³⁵ From 18 July 2020 to 31 October 2021, 1,636 citizens were charged with either violating computer crimes law, Article 112, or Emergency Decree; or all of these combined. See Thai Lawyers for Human Rights, “ตุลาคม 64: ยอดคดีการเมืองยืด 900 คดี ผู้ถูกดำเนินคดีรวมอย่างน้อย 1,636 คน” [October 2021: Political Lawsuits Nearly Reach 900 cases with at least 1,636 Citizens Being Charged], 8 November 2021 (<https://tlhr2014.com/archives/37550>, downloaded 13 December 2021).

³⁶ Janjira, “Securitization of Fake News”.

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