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## **Thailand: Contestation over elections, sovereignty and representation**

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**Abstract:** Thailand's politics in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen considerable contestation. Underlying the street protests, military interventions and considerable bloodshed has been a struggle over the nature of electoral politics, popular sovereignty and representation. The military and monarchy have maintained a royalist alliance that opposes elections, popular sovereignty and civilian politicians, proposing "Thai-style democracy" as an alternative. Those who promote elections and popular sovereignty argue that these are a basis for democratisation.

On May 22, 2014, Thailand's military staged yet another coup, unseating the government elected in 2011, led by Yingluck Shinawatra. By most calculations, this was Thailand's 12<sup>th</sup> successful coup. The 11<sup>th</sup> putsch in September 2006 ousted Yingluck's brother, Thaksin Shinawatra.

In considering these two most recent military interventions, it is striking that both were associated with a decade of large and sometimes aggressive street protests. As will be shown in this paper, at the core of these demonstrations have been competing ideas about democracy, elections and representation. Involving a range of actors, the most significant of the street protests have, on the one hand, been associated with the red-shirted supporters of Thaksin and, on the other hand, by their opponents, known as yellow shirts and more broadly identified – and self-identified – as royalists. Both groups have mobilized large numbers of supporters.

If the leaders of Thailand's competing political groups had ever thought to peruse the pages of this journal, they would have found much that resonated with their struggles and debates of the past decade. Indeed, the Electoral Reform Society (ERS) might have been claimed as something of a model by Thailand's most recent protesters, the "People's

Committee for Absolute Democracy with the King as Head of State” (PCAD). The PCAD argued that what they wanted was thorough-going political reform, and so its leaders might have agreed with the ERS view that “the present electoral system has little to recommend it...”. PCAD activists rejected Thailand’s electoral system and opposed voting because these were considered obstacles for political reform. They would have noticed resonance with their own rhetoric when the ERS pointed to injustices associated with electoral minorities, and the PCAD would have been heartened to read that the British electoral system was sometimes described as “undemocratic,” a term the PCAD regularly used in criticising Yingluck’s government (Electoral Reform Society, 1970: 1). They would also have noticed that at times the ERS questioned electoral mandates, for the PCAD consistently rejected the substantial election victory voters delivered for Yingluck in 2011 (Electoral Reform Society, 1971: 3).

At the same time, Yingluck’s Pheu Thai Party government and its supporters in the “United Democratic Front Against Dictatorship” (UDD), would certainly have agreed with a 1970 ERS article that lamented the “tendency to substitute various forms of demonstration for the ballot box...” (Electoral Reform Society, 1970: 1). They would have recognised the sentiment expressed in the article, “Let the voters arbitrate,” by the ERS’s “EL” (1975: 37); after all, as the PCAD rallied to bring down the Yingluck government and prevented an election, her supporters repeatedly demanded that their votes and their right to vote be respected.

In other words, even if the methods and outcomes may be quite different from those seen in Britain of the 1970s, the contested claims about the nature of electoral politics and about appropriate forms of representation are familiar in early 21<sup>st</sup> century Thailand. In this paper, the history and development of these competing claims will be examined. This historical contextualisation of Thailand’s debates over representation is critical in understanding the nature of the past decade of intense political conflict, from 2005 to 2014.

This recent period has seen seven prime ministers and was punctuated by two military coups. It is a conflict that has been destructive and divisive and has thrown competing claims about political representation into stark relief. In established democracies, the nature of this representation is sometimes contested but it seldom threatens a political regime. In Thailand, contestation over representation has led to violence, military intervention and deep political division. These struggles over representation have been about the very nature of the political order in Thailand.

### **Constitutionalism, representation and Thai-style democracy**

The struggles over representation in Thailand first developed in the decade or so prior to the 1932 rebellion that replaced the absolute monarchy with a constitutional regime. Initially, the monarchy was able to manage the calls for change and democracy. However, in 1932, it was pushed aside. The 1932 rebels proclaimed themselves the People's Party, and their first announcement was addressed to "All the people." The notion that the rebellion was by and for the common people was, of itself, a radical political statement in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Thailand.

The announcement began by pointing to corruption, cronyism and the lack of representation under the monarchy, stating that the king was not "listening to the voice of the people." The announcement made a case for popular sovereignty: "You, all of the people, should know that our country belongs to the people – not to the king..." and promised a constitutional regime and "government by an assembly...", suggesting a movement towards an electoral democracy. In establishing the new regime, the People's Party also promised equal rights, liberty and freedom (People's Party, 2000: 70-72). In a context where the

monarchy had ruled without constitution, representatives and legislature, the People's Party envisioned radical political arrangements.

The People's Party announcement set a tone that was to colour all of the political struggles of the past eight decades. Some of these challenges involved competing elites, most notably the competition between royalists who preferred narrow and hierarchical conceptions of representation, and those who favoured civilian and electoral regimes. At the same time, these elite scraps have occurred in a context of broader struggles involving non-elites. In the past three decades, there has been intense political activism as Thailand has lurched from one coup to another and as five interim and "permanent" constitutions have come and gone. Most recently, this contestation has seen considerable mobilisation that has sometimes resulted in bloodshed.

When the monarchy was overthrown in 1932, it was not defeated. Royalists re-grouped to become a political force, opposing the new constitutional regime. In a context of political plotting and rebellion, the People's Party statements on representative government failed to match its initial radicalism and there was a drift to military interventionism.

The first 1932 Constitution was marked "draft" by the king when it was presented to him by the People's Party. It was a radical charter in that it created a wholly appointed unicameral legislature of 70 members. This appointed assembly first met on 28 June 1932, less than a week after the People's Party seized power, and scheduled elections for late 1933. However, compromises were already underway with royalists and the monarchy. Under the "permanent" constitution of 1932, a fully-elected assembly was promised, but transitory arrangements were introduced that meant there would be 78 indirectly elected and 78 appointed members. The first direct elections were not held until November 1937 and the National Assembly remained half-appointed until after World War 2 (see Albritton and Thawilwadee 2004: 6).

The failure of the People's Party government to establish a fully representative parliament owed much to intense political conflict of the period. The 1932 overthrow of the monarchy is sometimes analysed as an elite coup (see Chambers, 2013: 119). However, this description ignores the considerable unrest and widespread dissatisfaction with royal absolutism that was seen in the period that led up to the People's Party intervention and which was compounded by the impact of the Great Depression. It also tends to miss the considerable public support for the People's Party (see Nakkarin, 1992; Hewison, 1986).

Evidence for this popular backing was seen in 1933 when royalists destabilised the new regime through bureaucratic machinations, and then launched a military rebellion. The rebellion was beaten but saw the defeated royalists become involved a series of plots meant to undermine the People's Party, its government and derail the political changes it promoted (Nattapoll, 2010). Under pressure from the royalists, regime maintenance became critical, and this resulted in the military faction of the People's Party, led by Field Marshal Phibun Songkhran, gaining greatest influence. The result was limited and often only rhetorical support for electoral politics for another decade.

For a brief moment following the war, electoral democracy and a fully-elected Assembly seemed possible. Elections were held in January 1946 and while political parties were not officially permitted to contest it, new political parties were formed, including the royalist Democrat Party (Thompson, 1948). Soon after, in May, a new constitution was signed into law by the young King Ananda Mahidol. Associated with Pridi Banomyong's civilian remnants of the People's Party, the new charter provided for a fully elected House of Representatives and a Senate that was chosen by the elected House. Pridi, considered a republican by royalists, was soon ousted by royalists who blamed him for the unexplained gunshot death of King Ananda in June 1946 (Pasuk and Baker, 1995: 266-269). The outcome of Pridi's ouster was that the royalists gained the political upper hand, with the November

1947 military coup leading to the arrest of dissident parliamentarians by the military. The coup group immediately abrogated the 1946 constitution, replacing it with a royalist-inspired charter that returned significant powers to the king, with the upper house was to be wholly appointed by the monarch. Elections were held for the lower house, and not unexpectedly resulted in a victory for the royalist Democrat Party. However, the Democrat premier was soon forced out by the military and further constitutional changes in 1949 moved more power into the hands of the military and monarchy (Harding and Leyland, 2011: 14-17). Reacting to demonstrations organised with the support of parliamentarians based in the Northeast who were seeking greater representation and challenging the military, another military coup eventuated in 1951. Political meetings were banned, as were political parties, parliament was dissolved, and the constitution abrogated (Pasuk and Baker, 1995: 270).

Despite these military interventions and considerable repression, the early 1950s was also a period of significant political agitation, much of it driven by a desire for representative politics to be promoted. The impetus for this agitation came from both domestic contestation and international changes following the Chinese Revolution and the outbreak of the Korean War (see Hewison and Rodan, 2012). The military's response was to crack down on those it identified as "separatists" and "communists," and as political alliances waxed and waned, tussles between police and military leaders saw Phibun dump the royalists, re-establish a 1932-like constitution and seek an electoral mandate. The resulting 1957 elections were a significant contest, but claims that Phibun's party engaged in election-rigging resulted in General Sarit Thanarat and his royalist allies overthrowing Phibun in yet another coup.

Essentially, this military intervention and the widespread repression that was instituted by Sarit forcefully took open discussions of representation off the political agenda. An ardent royalist, Sarit used the monarchy and the young king to bolster his legitimacy and developed ideologies – "Thai-style democracy" and the related notion of "Thainess" – that linked the

monarchy and military in a political position that rejected liberalism and electoral representation (Connors, 2007). Sarit's repression and his need for a legitimacy distinct from previous regimes revolved around a revival of the monarchy that continued, essentially uninterrupted, to the 2000s.

Sarit and successor military regimes gained strong Western support as an ally of the U.S. during the Cold War while anti-communism was a convenient excuse for the repression of political opponents. One result was that political liberals who favoured electoral representation were silenced and political opposition developed a harder edge as the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) launched a "people's war." While a parliament was in place for some periods in the 1960s, it counted for nothing, dominated by the military and thrown aside whenever the military decided it needed total control. Likewise, constitutional rule was rejected by military leaders, and interim and new constitutions were treated with contempt. Much of this was justified in terms of a unique "Thai-style democracy" (Hewison and Kengkij 2010).

### *Thai-style democracy*

Referred to in Thai as *prachathippatai baep thai*, Thai-style democracy developed from a belief that there can be a Thai-style of government (*kan pokkhong baep thai*). It was the royalist politician and minor prince Kukrit Pramoj who developed these ideas during Sarit's period, reflecting the nature of his dictatorial regime.<sup>1</sup> Kukrit and other royalists supported

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<sup>1</sup> Connors (2011: 668) prefers to view Kukrit as a "hybrid liberal-conservative" and suggests "Kukrit went to work with the sole intent of bringing the monarchy into its own." His view is that Kukrit sought to "position ... the monarchy at the apex of the political system, thus seeking to reverse praetorian tendencies." Unfortunately, the available evidence is that Kukrit maintained a perspective that there was an essential link between military and monarchy (see Kukrit, 1983: 75). Connors (2008) makes a broader claim for a "liberal royalism" that seeks to develop liberal political institutions tied to the monarchy. Such a project makes some political sense, although the events of 2006-14 would suggest that the model project was flawed and that the "liberals" willingly ceded their political space to anti-democrats and the military.



the monarchy and considered that constitutional constraints on the monarch were inappropriate in Thailand. When Sarit came to power and promoted the monarchy, his regime effectively made the king sovereign, in place of the previous constitutional conception that the people were sovereign (Kobkua, 2003: 57; see also Borwornsak, n.d.: 2).

The essential claim of this political philosophy is that “Western-style democracy” was prematurely transplanted to a Thailand that was culturally different from the West; for democracy to be successful, it needed to be “Thai-style.” This philosophy holds that Thailand is amenable to strong leadership and hierarchical organisation and asserts that a moral and strong leader who promotes national unity is best for the country and its people (Thak, 2007: 100-6). Representation was defined in these hierarchical and paternalistic terms where a father-leader would visit his “children” – the people – to learn of their needs and then initiate appropriate policy to meet these needs. This approach was considered superior to the “chaos” that was identified as resulting from electoral politics. It was in this context that Sarit’s despotic regime could proclaim itself “democratic” in a Thai political and cultural context and could dispense with “divisive” elections and a constitution (Thak, 2007: xiii). Kukrit, who supported Sarit and his use of dictatorial powers, argued that a military regime led by a “good” man was morally superior to being governed by elected but self-interested politicians (Saichol, 2007: 69). Kukrit justified military rule and the use of the putsch more broadly, arguing that these were necessary for the elimination of “bad” politicians and “chaotic” parliamentary politics. For Kukrit, it was only the military that, in alliance with the monarchy, that could deliver national unity and political stability. In this royalist perspective, the military coup became a mechanism for eliminating governments that lacked the appropriate moral leadership (see Saichol, 2007: 32-9, 54). In the royalist account of Thailand’s political history, this perspective was transformed into a generalised rejection of electoral politics and civilian politicians as chaotic and corrupt (Thongchai, 2008).

This attention to moral leadership enabled Kukrit to establish the significance of connection between military leadership and the monarch. As unimpeachably moral, the king operated as a watchdog over government, maintaining the nation's and the people's best interests. Kukrit defined a "good" political leader in moral terms tying this to loyalty to the king and a duty to protect the monarchy, making military leaders the best-placed examples of such a loyal leader under the moral guidance of the king (Saichol, 2007: 40-65). In this philosophy, representation was linked directly with the hereditary monarchy which was able to determine the best interests of the people.

The long period of military interventionism and the alliance of Sarit's regime with the palace and the royalist political faction established Thai-style democracy as the dominant political model, displacing and restricting more liberal, representative and democratic political alternatives.

Thai-style democracy with the monarchy central to politics as a "moral" force and the military as its "protector" was essential for the longevity of military rule. The monarchy had played a critical ideological role for the military regime that made the war against the CPT a battle for the trilogy of "nation, religion and monarchy" considered "sacred." The regime's political model conceptualised elected politicians as self-interested, self-serving and lacking the necessary virtue to rule; allowing them to rule threatened the national trilogy. This juxtaposition of moral monarchy and "bad" politicians has continued to characterise debates about representation until the present day.

### *Challenging Thai-style representation*

By 1973, the military regime that Sarit established had been in power for almost 12 years. Aside from the CPT, the main challenge to this long period of military-monarchy rule

came in the early 1970s, from academics and students. Following a gradual build-up of student activism, in October 1973, the spark for massive demonstrations was the arrest of twelve activists for producing and distributing leaflets demanding that a constitution be drafted and enacted. With the detainees accused of attempting to overthrow the government, student demonstrations of support soon mushroomed into a broad movement against the military dictatorship (Prajak, 2005). The military leaders were sent into exile after massive demonstrations and the king separated himself from the unpopular regime. In the moment of political vacuum, it was the king who seized the political initiative and managed a transfer of power to an electoral regime. The king was able to do this by (briefly and belatedly) by separating himself from the military, declaring and demonstrating his “moral superiority” and ejecting the military dictators (Handley, 2006: 194-213).

The sudden release from the repression of years of military rule and the rapid changes taking place in Southeast Asia as the Vietnam War ended resulted in an efflorescence of protest and multiple challenges to the regime and royalist elite. Electoral politics bloomed, with 46 parties standing candidates and 22 of them winning seats in the 1975 election, resulting in an unstable multi-party centre-right coalition government. Political conflict increased, and as strikes, leftist ideology and peasant resistance became more widespread, the monarchy-military alliance was quickly re-energised. The king, fearful of left-wing activism and the advent of communism on Thailand’s borders, abandoned his dalliance with electoral politics and supported military and other royalist and right-wing groups who engaged in a widespread campaign of political repression and assassination (Pasuk and Baker, 1995: 306-311). Parliament and political parties were ineffective and largely ignored as politics became increasingly violent, and an early election in April 1976 produced another ineffective coalition. The political situation quickly deteriorated, leading to a massacre of university students by royalists, police and rightists, followed by a military coup on 6 October 1976.

Close to the king, the new royalist prime minister declared that there would be no return to electoral politics for at least 12 years. While he was ousted in another military coup in 1977, and there were elections in 1979, 1983 and 1986, these were of little consequence as the military continued to control the premiership. For the period from 1980 to 1988, the unelected royalist General Prem Tinsulanonda was prime minister and he and the military controlled the appointed Senate. In these circumstances, the electorate voted for members of political parties who sat in the House of Representatives, but this chamber had virtually no impact on policy or on the course of politics (Hicken, 2004). Even when Prem was moved aside, the military was able to conduct another coup in 1991, eliminating yet another elected government that it accused of corruption.

As had become the pattern, the coup resulted in a new constitution, supported by the king, and the military set about entrenching its control of politics (Handley, 2006: 342-5). Yet it was this coup, and especially the May 1992 civilian uprising against the military's attempt to enhance its control, that saw the military disgraced and a renewed effort to establish electoral democracy. With the military pushed aside, a long process of constitutional drafting began. It was not until the advent of the Asian Financial Crisis that the parliament adopted the reformist constitution. The 1997 charter was the first to involve wide consultation, and took seriously issues of human rights, decentralization and the establishment of checks-and-balances it remained an elite-dominated political outcome. It was meant to establish a more stable electoral politics by making the executive stronger and by establishing a greater degree on party control over MPs. The aim was to prevent "party-hopping" by MPs and to combat "money politics" which saw politicians using ill-gotten funds to buy votes and even the support of parliamentarians (MPs) in elections and "revolving-door" coalition governments. The aim was to establish a stable party system, a strong executive and, in a tilt to the royalist

ideological position, set up institutions to maintain appropriate checks and balances over politicians (Harding and Leyland, 2011: 21-6).

The first election under the 1997 charter were held in early 2001 and resulted in a convincing victory for Thaksin and his Thai Rak Thai Party. After serving a full term, Thaksin and his party were re-elected in a landslide victory in 2005. Ironically, Thaksin was to be the only premier elected under the 1997 constitution.

That constitution was thrown out by the military in 2006, with strong support from the palace, and the 2007 constitution was drawn up with military tutelage. It was meant to prevent any Thaksin-like domination of electoral politics. It also increased the power and reach of the judiciary and other check-and-balance institutions. However, as pro-Thaksin parties continued to win substantial election victories, in 2007 and 2011, in May 2014, the military threw out the 2007 constitution.

### **Street protests and representation**

Both the 2006 and 2014 putsches were preceded by months of street protest against Thaksin and then pro-Thaksin governments. In 2006, the anti-Thaksin protests were led by the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), a loose alliance of civil society, businesses, elite and royalist groups that opposed the parliamentary power of Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai Party. Following the 2006 coup, PAD disbanded, only to return in 2008 to oppose the pro-Thaksin government that had won the 2007 election. When that government was ousted by a judicial intervention in December 2008, PAD dissolved into several groups promoting ultra-royalism, ultra-nationalism and opposition to Thaksin. One aspect of its rhetoric was its growing opposition to representative and electoral politics. Following yet another election victory by a pro-Thaksin party in 2011, PAD's remnants joined with several other anti-Thaksin and

royalist groups to become the anti-democratic “People's Committee for Absolute Democracy with the King as Head of State.” PCAD’s street protests continued a rhetoric that opposed electoral politics and paved the way for the May 2014 coup.

These royalist protest groups were opposed by the pro-Thaksin “red shirts,” associated with the “United Democratic Front Against Dictatorship” (UDD). The UDD initially organised after the 2006 coup and in opposition to the military-backed constitutional referendum in 2007. In its rallies it opposed the military, elite interference in politics and for electoral politics while also supporting Thaksin. Red shirt demonstration in 2009 and 2010 resulted in the army being used to defeat them, resulting in considerable loss of life and injuries.

Thailand’s decade of street protest has sometimes been portrayed as a tussle of competing elites, with a rising elite, associated with Thaksin, challenging the long-dominant conservative elite of palace-connected military leaders, big business/old money and technocrats (Hewison, 2008: 205-7). There was an element of this in the early period of disputation. However, as the conflict deepened, there has been society-wide mobilization and political polarization. Remarkably, some eight decades after the People’s Party took power, this conflict centred on political discourses that pitted those promoting the monarchy and Thai-style democracy against others who opposed the royalist’s political dominance and demanded that electoral politics be accepted and strengthened.

The PCAD’s mobilisations in 2014 had several consistent and inter-related themes: anti-corruption, protection of the monarchy, and a rejection of electoral democracy. Anti-corruption was especially attractive for Bangkok’s middle class which was accepting of the royalist ideological weaving together of arguments that civilian politicians are corrupt, gaining election through “policy corruption” or “money politics,” using the electoral system to maintain their power. Politicians were untrustworthy, voters are bought, duped or ignorant,

and so electoral politics is the core of the corruption problem. As noted above, in this discourse, the monarchy was considered essential for moderating these allegedly corrupt politicians (Thongchai, 2008). That there is a corruption problem in Thailand is not contested. However, the almost exclusive linking of this with civilian and elected politicians is as part of the royalist denigration and rejection of electoral politics. That the business class, military, police and the bureaucracy have long been demonstrated to engage in corrupt activities seems to matter little in this political discourse (Pasuk and Sungsidh, 1999).

The second theme – protecting the monarchy – is dated to Sarit’s coup. As noted above, Sarit re-invented a relationship between the monarchy and military that saw the latter base its legitimacy on the king as the monarchy was positioned as central for the authoritarian rule of the military and Thai-style democracy. Royalist governments since 1976 have re-energised the *lèse-majesté* law. That law has been repeatedly used against political opponents as a means of silencing criticism. Indeed, following the 2006 coup, when the military-backed government defined the monarchy as an element of national security, *lèse-majesté* repression has expanded exponentially. Under Thailand’s Penal Code, *lèse majesté* is now considered an offence against national security (Sinfah and Mendel 2010). By the time that anti-Thaksin street demonstrations began in early 2006, PAD made its protests a royalist revolt against Thaksin’s “parliamentary dictatorship” (Pye and Schaffer, 2008). Pro-royal symbolism was central to PAD’s fight against Thaksin, who was not just identified as a corrupt politician but as a leader who was disloyal to the throne. In terms of Thai-style democracy, Thaksin was accused of having strayed beyond accepted boundaries. PAD’s decision to beseech the monarch to intervene and unseat Thaksin, while ultimately rejected by the king, was critical in setting the path towards the palace’s co-operation with the military in the 2006 coup (Connors, 2008, Connors and Hewison, 2008). When anti-Thaksin and royalist groups once more coagulated as the anti-democratic “People's Committee for Absolute Democracy with

the King as Head of State” in 2014, its name conveyed the notion that the political contest was of moral royalists opposed to corrupt, elected politicians.

The third theme of rejecting electoral democracy became significant for street demonstrators in 2006, when PAD’s activism against Thaksin as anti-democratic was overtaken by its pleas for royal political intervention. As Pye and Schaffer (2008: 55) make clear, while there was “some discussion of the option of direct democracy and of ‘people’s power,’ this remained a minority position within the movement...”. After the 2006 coup failed to change the political system in ways that prevented pro-Thaksin parties winning elections, PAD leader Sondhi Limthongkul railed against electoral politics as “corrupt,” declaring: “Representative democracy is not suitable for Thailand” (*Newsweek*, 5 September 2008). PAD’s leaders created a political party and made a call for a “new politics” that sought a “clean” politics and rejected electoral democracy. Another leader said PAD wanted an electoral system in which less than a third of the lower house was to be elected, with the rest being appointed by the educated “great and good.” This proposal was to prevent election victories where the “uneducated poor” were repeatedly duped by “corrupt politicians” (*The Guardian*, 3 December 2008). This call matched claims by royalist ideologues like Prawase Wasi who, following the 2006 coup, declared that “society had to admit that politicians – who are elected to represent the people – create problems,” and called for restrictions on the political and policy roles of elected politicians (*Nation*, 29 November 2006). Later, in September 2008, he declared that the parliamentary system was “not true democracy but dictatorship,” and because it was “under the command of an individual person [Thaksin], the parliamentary system is no solution” (cited in Nelson, 2010: 121).

Such anti-liberal and anti-democratic views were widely held amongst those who made up the various groups opposed to Thaksin. Those who voted for pro-Thaksin parties were declared ignorant and bought and admonished as dumb “red buffalo.” The image was of red



shirts being led by the nose to vote and to rally by the “populist” Thaksin. The image of the “red buffalo” has been a staple of royalist ASTV/Manager cartoons that denigrate voters and voting (see 2bangkok.com, 2012). When the PCAD was on the streets from late 2013, led by senior figures from the opposition Democrat Party, it also campaigned against elections, referring to a “parliamentary dictatorship” and “majoritarianism.” This anti-election language was combined with attacks on voters, a campaign to block candidate registration, prevent the distribution of ballots and a violent boycott of elections. PCAD made repeated claims that elected politicians were the root cause of Thailand’s political crisis.

PCAD street protesters rejected electoral democracy as distorted and not “real” democracy. PCAD argued that no election could be “free and fair” until the “Thaksin regime” had been destroyed. Their ultimatum was that the Yingluck government should be thrown out, replaced by an appointed government and an appointed reform committee to ensure the Thaksin regime uprooted. It was argued that elections are just one aspect of democracy and that pro-Thaksin governments engaged in “majoritarianism,” riding rough-shod over the minority that did not vote for the pro-Thaksin party. Electoral majorities were swept aside in the anti-democratic rhetoric.

Both PAD and the PCAD, dominated by the Bangkok-based elite and middle class, have campaigned for a “democracy” that places greater reliance on selected and appointed “representatives,” usually opting for ministers or a royally-appointed “national government.” Such calls fit well with the royalist elite’s proposals for Thai-style democracy. The paternalism of this approach was evident when the military took power in May 2014. The junta’s Orwellian doublespeak saw the coup defined as an act to strengthen “democracy”:

[the] NCPO [the military junta] and all Thai citizens uphold and have faith in the democratic system with His Majesty the King as Head of State. [The] NCPO fully

realizes that the military intervention may be perceived by the West as a threat to democracy and a violation of the people's liberty. However, this military intervention was inevitable, in order to uphold national security *and to strengthen democracy* (Government Public Relations Department, 2014, emphasis added).

This manipulation of governance symbols had previously taken up by PCAD protesters who trumpeted transparency and anti-corruption, defining "true" democracy as an opposition to elections.

Those on the other side of this struggle also championed democracy, but made a far simpler argument that had its roots in 1932. The principles of the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD), the official red shirt movement, stated, *inter alia*, that the UDD sought to "attain true democracy with sovereignty truly in the hands of the people of Thailand with the King as the head of state."<sup>2</sup> It also made the point that the UDD was a grassroots movement seeking "democracy and justice while resisting 'aristocratic' forces that obstructs equitable and democratic national development" (UDD, n.d.; see also UDD, 2010). As well as restating the principle of sovereignty being with the people, red shirts observed that winning several elections should count for something. In contrast to the PCAD, they asserted that political reform should take place within an electoral democracy rather than be imposed by an unelected and unrepresentative body. They asserted that there could be no democracy without voting. They pointed out that the repeated overturning of some very substantial election victories was as an affront to democratic politics and devalued their votes.

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<sup>2</sup> The statement included the words "king as head of state" was required for two reasons. First, to reduce claims that the UDD was "disloyal"; and second for constitutional reasons as Section 68 of the 2007 constitution made it illegal to propose a form of government other than "the democratic regime of government with the King as Head of State..." (Government of Thailand, 2007: section 68).

By 2014, it was the anti-democratic discourse that devalued votes and voters had gained the political ascendancy, with the military coup. The military junta has declared that sovereignty is with the monarch rather than the people or parliament:

In the name of His Majesty the King who presented his royal power to us, today who among us thinks of 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 (General Prayuth Chan-ocha, cited in Jory, 2014: 2).

Prayuth was speaking to an appointed assembly, yet his claim that sovereignty was with the monarch amounted to a rejection of the popular sovereignty asserted by the People's Party in 1932 when it proclaimed: "You, all of the people, should know that our country belongs to the people – not to the king...". In 2014, the military-palace alliance felt confident in rejecting the proclamation of popular sovereignty that had underpinned notions of representation for eight decades.

## **Conclusion**

Thailand's seemingly non-stop street protests came to an end with the 2014 military coup, the second military intervention in a decade. A military coup is not an unusual event for Thailand yet this putsch was avowedly royalist and its leaders have rejected the practices of electoral politics of the period since the 1997 constitution. More radically, the military

leaders have declared that they will rewrite the rules of politics through hand-picked assemblies dominated by military and police generals. The blueprint for this radical programme is Thai-style democracy, a royalist rejection of notions of popular sovereignty and representation. As in the past, the triumph of this reactionary political ideology will be challenged by popular agitation against royalist and military domination and against restrictions that limit rights, representation and democratic decision-making.

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