

Thailand's Relapse: The Implications of the May 2014 Coup

CLAUDIO SOPRANZETTI

ON MAY 20, 2014, the Royal Army imposed martial law on Thailand, with the declared purpose of restoring peace to the people. Allegedly, the military intervened to put an end to seven months of political turmoil that had begun when the PDRC—the English acronym for the Thai People's Committee for Absolute Democracy with the King as Head of State—occupied key street intersections and government offices in Bangkok.¹ The conservative mobilization had demanded the deposition of elected Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra and the complete dismissal of “the Thaksin system”—a network that had dominated electoral politics in the previous thirteen years, in the PDRC's view through corruption and vote-buying. To fight this injustice, the PDRC had called for deep constitutional reforms before the next elections could be held.

On December 6, 2013, in response to the protests, Yingluck dissolved the parliament and, as her brother had done before the 2006 coup, called for snap elections, hoping they would confirm her popular support and quiet down the protests. The opposition Democrat Party and the PDRC's supporters decided to boycott the February polls. Amidst disruptions and violence, Yingluck won the elections. However, as had happened after her brother's second reelection in 2006, the constitutional court nullified the vote.

As the country remained without an elected government, Prayuth Chan-Ocha, the army commander in chief who had directed the violent dispersal of Red Shirts protesters in 2010, declared martial law.² He invited representatives from the two main political parties and two social movements that had taken the streets under his watch—the Red Shirts and the PDRC—to sit at the negotiation table and solve their disagreements. Prayuth's patience, however, was short-lived. On the second day of talks, unsatisfied with the progress, he stood up and calmly declared, “I am sorry. I must seize power.” Many in the room thought he was joking. His words, however, were dead serious.

It was May 22. Prayuth had staged the twelfth successful military coup in Thailand since the formal end of absolute monarchy in 1932 and taken into custody everybody in the room. Even if sharing the same cells, the PDRC's and Democrat Party's

Claudio Sopranzetti (sopranzetti.claudio@gmail.com) is Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the All Souls College at the University of Oxford.

¹The PDRC emerged in November 2013 as a new organization for anti-Thaksin activism. It included a small contingent of former elements of the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD)—most commonly known as Yellow Shirts—as well as supporters of the Democrat Party and members of the Network of Students and Citizens for Reforms.

²Claudio Sopranzetti, “The Owners of the Map: Mobility and Mobilization among Motorcycle Taxi Drivers in Bangkok,” *City & Society* 26, no. 1 (2014): 120–46.

representatives rejoiced in the decision while Yingluck's party and the Red Shirts' members denounced the umpteenth military hijacking of the country's democratic process, the second in a decade to remove a Shinawatra from office.

At first, the coup looked like a tired script that had played out in the 2006 coup. This would entail a short-lived military junta followed by the appointment of an interim government run by either a general or a highly respected figure. The next step would be a new constitution giving more power to independent institutions that would operate as checks and balances and limit the power of elected governments. Finally, elections would be held in a year or so. Following this script, the discussion could quickly move to whom the interim prime minister would be, what the next constitution may look like and, behind closed doors, what the role of the monarchy had been in this coup and how this new phase would affect the looming royal succession. The sensation of *déjà vu*, however, was short lived. Soon after the coup, Prayuth's actions instigated a series of events that diverged from the previous decades of cyclical elections, political turmoil, popular mobilizations, and military or judiciary interventions.³ Heavy repression, centralization of power, royal silence, and a restructuring of the relation between the rule of law and military actions—all of these aspects represented a radical diversion from the months after the 2006 coup and the Thai army's behavior in the former decades.

In this article, I focus on these diversions and see them as symptomatic of a larger plan to demolish democratic achievements and initiate a swing of the pendulum between dictatorial conservatisms and democratic rule that has framed Thai politics since the deposition of the absolute monarch in 1932.⁴ While the two poles have remained, each swing takes new forms. I explore the current configuration as revolving around three main elements: firstly, a new administrative structure directed by military officers rather than elected politicians; secondly, the promulgation of an ideological apparatus that remystifies the Thai polity around the monarchy and gives prominence to anti-corruption over democratization; and thirdly, the establishment of a new class alliance between traditional elites, military forces, and urban middle classes. These transformations, when seen as a coherent plan, have broken the alignment between electoral systems, democratic ideology, and electoral majorities that has dominated Thai politics over the last two decades. In this sense, I conclude, the effects of the 2014 coup reveal symptoms of the Thai body politics' relapse into dictatorial administrative structures, political attitudes, and military-led class alliances that seemed to have been forever surpassed by the 1990s.

³Duncan McCargo, "Thailand's Army Tears Up the Script," *New York Times*, May 30, 2014; Felicity Aulino, Eli Elinoff, Claudio Sopranzetti, and Ben Tausig, "The Wheel of Crisis in Thailand," *Cultural Anthropology*, September 23, 2014, <http://culanth.org/fieldsights/582-the-wheel-of-crisis-in-thailand> (accessed February 20, 2016).

⁴James Stent, "Thoughts on Thailand's Turmoil, 11 June 2010," in *Bangkok May 2010: Perspectives on a Divided Thailand*, eds. Michael J. Montesano, Pavin Chachavalongpun, and Chongvilavan Aekapol (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2012), 15–41.

RELAPSE SYMPTOMS: THE RECIDIVISM OF THE THAI BODY POLITIC

Since the 1970s, democratic openings had alternated in Thailand with military takeovers. The 1990s began with another swing of this pendulum. In 1991, General Suchinda staged a coup against an elected government and attempted to become the new prime minister. This time however, a popular movement took to the streets to stop the military. After days of mass protests in May 1992, violently repressed by the army, the king stepped in, summoned the leaders of the opposing sides, and, in a televised meeting, put an end to the conflict and pushed the country onto democratic tracks. The army, which had dominated Thai politics since the late 1930s and brought back Bhumibol as an adolescent king after the mysterious death of his brother, was sent back to the barracks. An alliance between middle classes and workers took to the streets, demanding fair and democratic representation. The popularly acclaimed and politically vigorous king, celebratory voices agreed, sided with this alliance and opened a new era of democratic governance.

The road to democracy, prophetically described by Benedict Anderson in 1977 as a collective withdrawal from authoritarian tendencies, had been long, bloody, and tormented.⁵ The patient, it seemed, made it through. The body politic was getting stronger, more democratic, and finally able to elect its own leaders, even though under a growing royalist ideology. Thai analysts, besides a few voices who warned that the transformation was nothing more than a trading of military control for royalist electoralism, and pointing out the erasure of workers' and the urban poor's roles in the mobilization, celebrated this new age of freedom and democracy.⁶

The following years saw unprecedented political openings. After the next elections, members of the civil society—increasingly a force to be reckoned with—embarked on the stipulation of a new constitution under a popularly elected Drafting Assembly. The so-called “people’s constitution” was passed in October 1997, a few months after the economic crisis hit Thailand. The constitution created a new administrative structure that gave center stage to electoral participation and checks and balances, recognized human rights provisions, and pushed for the transferal “of functions, responsibilities, and other resources to local government and ... lessened the significance of bureaucrats

⁵Benedict R. Anderson, “Withdrawal Symptoms: Social and Cultural Aspects of the October 6 Coup,” *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 9, no. 3 (1977): 13–30.

⁶Thongchai Winichakul, “The Monarchy and Anti-Monarchy: Two Elephants in the Room of Thai Politics and the State of Denial,” in *Good Coup Gone Bad: Thailand's Political Developments since Thaksin's Downfall*, ed. Pavin Chachavalpongpun (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2014), 79–108; Ji Ungpakorn, *The Struggle for Democracy and Social Justice in Thailand* (Bangkok: Arom Pongpangan Foundation, 1997); Tamada Yoshifumi, *Myths and Realities: The Democratization of Thai Politics* (Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, 2008); Andrew Brown, “Locating Working Class Power,” in *Political Change in Thailand: Democracy and Participation*, ed. Kevin Hewison (New York: Routledge, 1997), 163–78; William A. Callahan, *Imagining Democracy: Reading “the Events of May” in Thailand* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1998); Khān Thīrawit, *Thailand in Crisis: A Study of the Political Turmoil of May 1992* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 1997); Anek Laothamatas, *Democratization in Southeast and East Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1997); Wongsekiarttirat Wathana, “Central-Local Relations in Thailand: Bureaucratic Centralism and Democratization,” in *Central-Local Relations in Asia-Pacific: Convergence or Divergence?* ed. Mark Turner (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 71–97.

over local administrations.”⁷ In this sense, it marked the carving onto laws of the trajectory of democratization initiated in the streets of Bangkok.

The 1997 constitution, extending the power of elected officials both at the local and national level and the number of parliamentarians directly elected, paved the way for a new generation of elected politicians, able to garner unprecedented popular support. The main representative of this new breed was Thaksin Shinawatra. A former police officer, Thaksin had made a fortune through state-given monopolies on computers and telecommunication. In 2001, amidst the government’s inability to push the country out of the 1997 crisis, he was elected as prime minister with the support of the same middle classes, civil society organizations, and rural masses that had led the 1992 mobilizations. His victory showed, for the first time in Thai history, that mobilizing electoral support could propel an official to the very center of state power. Thaksin’s mix of relentless electoral marketing and authoritarian efficiency paid off, and after concluding a full term he was reelected in 2005 in a one-party victory—unprecedented in Thailand. Whether as the result of Thaksin’s political agenda or the unwanted consequence of his political schemes, under his watch an expanding regional electorate took the helm of politics, showing collective agreement and solidifying the role of elected politicians in state administration, while the military’s influence decreased. At the same time, Thaksin abused the powers given to him by the new constitution. During these years, he made independent organizations toothless, openly attacked the human rights commission, and acted as if electoral support granted him a position above unelected checks-and-balances, and often above the law itself.

Thaksin’s authoritarian tendencies pushed the “people’s constitution” to its limits, shattering the alliance between middle classes, civil society organizations, and rural masses that had brought him to power. As a result, the 2005 Yellow Shirts mobilizations that called for his resignation on the grounds of his authoritarianism and alleged corruption claimed to be directed at fine-tuning democracy, rather than attacking the results of popular elections.⁸ Even when the military staged a coup on September 19, 2006, for the first time in fifteen years, many political activists, public intellectuals, and members of civil society welcomed the military intervention as the lesser evil when compared to Thaksin’s authoritarianism, human rights violations, and dismissal of checks and balances.⁹ Even critical voices presented the army’s seizure of power as a blip, a temporary deviation from the stable track on which the country had entered in the 1990s, or an attempt to derail the country destined to fail.¹⁰

To their credit, the 2006 junta did appoint an interim prime minister rapidly after its seizure of power—even though himself a general—and promulgated a new constitution,

⁷Chardchawarn Supasawad, “Local Governance in Thailand: The Politics of Decentralization and the Roles of Bureaucrats, Politicians, and the People,” Institute of Developing Economies, Japan External Trade Organization, *VRF Series* 459 (2010): 12.

⁸John Funston, ed., *Divided over Thaksin: Thailand’s Coup and Problematic Transition* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2009); Kevin Hewison, “Thaksin Shinawatra and the Reshaping of Thai Politics,” *Contemporary Politics* 16, no. 2 (2010): 119–33.

⁹Kasian Tejapira, “Toppling Thaksin,” *New Left Review* 29 (2006): 5–37.

¹⁰Pavin Chachavalongpun, ed., *Good Coup Gone Bad: Thailand’s Political Developments since Thaksin’s Downfall* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2014); Thongchai Winichakul, “Toppling Democracy,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 38, no. 1 (2008): 11–37.

even though ratified in a heavily militarized referendum in 2007. This document reduced the number of senatorial seats directly elected and gave unprecedented power to the “independent bodies,” such as the anti-corruption and election commissions that over the following years would remove elected prime ministers and dissolve ruling parties close to Thaksin. Nonetheless, the new constitution largely retraced the 1997 document and paved the way for fresh elections on December 23, 2007—elections promptly won, as each one since 2001, by a party affiliated with Thaksin Shinawatra. Once again anti-Thaksin forces intervened and managed, with a mix of street protests—most prominently an airport blockade—and interventions by those independent bodies, to systematically overthrow elected governments. The “good coup” that was supposed to bring Thailand back to its democratic path created a country in which no popularly elected politician was allowed to govern for more than nine months, until the election of Yingluck Shinawatra in August 2011.

This election seemed to finally bring the country out of the impasse. Under the threat of further Red Shirts uprisings, Yingluck struck an agreement with royal elites and military that allowed her to hold on to power.¹¹ Mixing Thaksin's policies with a less imposing and authoritarian style, she governed without significant opposition until November 2013. Halfway through her term, however, she proposed an ill-conceived amnesty bill that would give immunity to everyone who had been accused of political crimes since the 2006 coup. Almost immediately, seeing this as an attempt to bring Thaksin back to Thailand, the PDRC took to the streets to demand her resignation, the Shinawatras' complete expulsion from politics, and radical constitutional reforms before a new election. It was in response to this resulting instability that, in his own words, General Prayuth staged a coup, which he had defined in February of that year as an obsolete strategy, unfit for a modern country. A month and a half later, he had changed his mind and plunged the country back into a military dictatorship.

LIFE UNDER PRAYUTH

Life under the new regime, as under any dictatorship, is divided and often contradictory. On the one hand, it goes on normally. Shopping malls and restaurants are crowded and streets filled by the usual frenzy of vendors and office workers, almost boosted by the end of the street protests that had dominated the country and taken its capital city hostage multiple times over the last decade. On the other hand, people involved in direct actions and critical activities are watched, controlled, and silenced. In these circles, the dominant feeling is one of being inside a perimeter that is slowly closing in around them, while the rest of the society quietly pretends not to see it.

The mix of fear and paranoia is not unwarranted. Since this coup, in fact, Thailand has gone back to a level of repression and control that was forgotten since the 1970s. Even if on April 1, 2015, the junta lifted the martial law that had been in place for the previous ten months, the country remains under Article 44 of the interim constitution, which gives the government the right to issue an order to take any action deemed

¹¹Kevin Hewison, “Avoiding Conflict: Thailand after the Red Shirt Uprising,” *Political Insight* 3, no. 3 (2012): 28–31.

necessary to preserve security, which could potentially mean detaining people without charges or even going as far as executing them without trial. While executions have not been part of Prayuth's toolkit, the regime has summoned more than 830 people and arrested 506 of them. One hundred fifty-five people have been tried in military court—which implies being judged by three soldiers, only one of whom needs to be trained in law, and having no right to appeal. Even more viciously, the *lèse-majesté* law, which punishes anybody who criticizes members of the royal family with detention for between three and fifteen years, has been used with unprecedented frequency to attack political opponents. In the last two years, in fact, at least sixty-five people have been charged while, before the coup, only five people were in jail convicted on these charges and five more were awaiting trial.¹² Similarly, the actions that count as criticism of the royal institution have been expanded widely to include criticizing the law itself, liking pictures on Facebook, and even mocking the king's dog.

Hundreds of people have left the country for fear of arrests and other forms of repression, among them local political organizers, popular radio hosts, journalists, academics, and activists. The most prominent have made their way to Europe, the United States, Australia, or Japan. Many others, less visible and therefore more at risk, have crossed into Laos or Cambodia and are regrouping there, often under the risk of an agreement between local governments and the Thai junta. Inside the country, any form of criticism has been systematically and harshly persecuted and punished through detentions and arrests. Political activities are banned and media heavily censored or shut down if they refused to comply with the junta's orders. Thailand has now more blocked websites than China, and people have been prosecuted for critical Facebook postings and chat-room discussions. Military personnel regularly stop and prevent debates in universities, journalists' clubs, and bookstores, and so far they have charged thirty-five people for sedition, a crime that carries a punishment of up to seven years in jail.

The junta's interventions, however, not only hampered political discussions and limited freedom of expression. Two years after the coup, Prayuth remains in power and is carrying out a deep reform of political and social institutions, a structured attempt to remake the Thai polity.¹³ This is not to say that symptoms of this relapse into anti-democratic tendencies are entirely new to this coup. On the contrary, as I hinted at before, they started to emerge around 2005, came to the forefront with the following year's coup, and have lurked at the back of the political stage ever since. In this sense, the May 2014 coup represents a decisive push toward a new institutional configuration first drafted by the 2006 junta. This, I argue, prefigures a new sociopolitical structure for Thailand, understood as "a set of ideas about the distribution of power,"¹⁴ and, I add, about concrete techniques for mobilizing people and governing the nation, that revolves around the realignment of administrative structures, ideological apparatuses, and class alliances in the country.

¹²iLaw, "364 Days after the Coup: Report on the Situation of Freedom of Expression in Thailand," September 3, 2015, <http://freedom.ilaw.or.th/en/node/259> (accessed February 20, 2016).

¹³Porphant Ouyyanont, "Thailand: A New Polity in the Making?" *ISEAS Perspective* 59 (2014).

¹⁴Edmund Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1954), 4.

DE-DEMOCRATIZATION AND THE REMAKING OF A SOCIOPOLITICAL STRUCTURE

The trajectory of democratization in Thailand in the 1990s and early 2000s developed around a specific arrangement of class, ideology, and administrative structures, one that resonated with traditional democratization theory. This theory centered around the idea that middle classes are the bedrock of democracy and that their expansion would create demands for democratic participation in the political sphere.¹⁵ Before 2005, Thailand seemed to fit this narrative. In Bangkok, many members of the middle class protested the military takeover. More structurally, civil society organizations took the lead in framing the 1997 constitution and reorganizing a national administrative apparatus that brought to power a strong elected government under Thaksin Shinawatra. The middle class was indeed pushing for new forms of political participation and in so doing reforming state administration and ideology.

This alignment, however, started to break apart around 2006. Allegedly liberal middle classes were now supporting a military intervention to remove an elected prime minister in order to “protect democracy.” The PDRC mobilization that paved the way for the May 2014 coup moved a step forward and, demanding to reform the administrative apparatus away from the one-person one-vote electoral system, revealed the complete undoing of that alignment. Thirayut Boonmi, an iconic leader of the 1973 uprising, one of the most influential intellectuals behind the 1990s pro-democracy mobilizations, and a PDRC sympathizer, voiced the most striking formulation of this new configuration. Speaking to *The Nation*, a middle-class newspaper whose editorial line moved along with its readers’ opinion from a pro-democracy publication in the 1990s to a pro-military one in the present, Thirayut declared: “Those who voted for the Yingluck Shinawatra administration have forfeited their rights by accepting a corrupt and dictatorial government, which would have to be removed by a people’s revolution.”¹⁶ Echoing the discourse of the PDRC’s supporters, he argued that participation in the administration of the country is a right reserved for citizens who vote the “right” government according to the will of the people’s revolution, a political force here defined not by majority rule but by the “moral” standing of its representatives.

The paradox of this argument has been analyzed by a number of scholars who have seen this arrangement as “resulting from the very nature of new social movements” or directed by an enemy-of-my-enemy-is-my-friend mentality.¹⁷ These readings, while invaluable in explaining the emergence of this new alignment, underestimate its relevance for the Thai polity. On the contrary, I see this as the most prominent symptom of its relapse toward authoritarianism, a relapse driven by Prayuth’s dictatorial state administration: the emerging ideological apparatus he is pushing forward, and a new class alliance between elites, military, and middle classes that support his regime.

¹⁵Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

¹⁶Walden Bello, “Civil Conflict Is Sliding Toward an Uncivil War,” *Nation*, February 14, 2014.

¹⁷Kengkij Kitirianglarp and Kevin Hewison, “Social Movements and Political Opposition in Contemporary Thailand,” *Pacific Review* 22, no. 4 (2009): 451–77, 471; see also Elliot Norton, “Illiberal Democrats versus Undemocratic Liberals: The Struggle over the Future of Thailand’s Fragile Democracy,” *Asia Journal of Political Science* 20, no. 1 (2012): 44–69.

Remaking State Administration

On July 22, 2014, two months after taking power, the junta enacted an interim constitution. Rather than limiting the power of a specific side of the political spectrum, as the 2007 constitution did, the document waged an attack on elected politicians *tout-court* by putting state administration solidly in the hands of unelected organizations. The interim constitution, in this sense, testifies to Prayuth's attempt to undo established political and civil rights—a move that will be much harder to dispel if it becomes formalized in the new constitution.¹⁸ Even though the early articles of the interim constitution pay lip service to human rights, the text rapidly progresses to undo the influence of elected politicians, which have driven the Thai administration since 1997. Article 8, for instance, determines that none of the 220 members of the National Legislative Assembly—the new parliament under the junta—may have held any position in a political party in the previous three years prior or have been barred or removed from political office. Given the recent Thai history of banning politicians from office after the 2006 and 2014 coups, this effectively eliminates nearly all political figures with any popular support in the last decade and a half from sitting in the interim parliament that will ratify the final constitution. Articles 44, 47, and 48 assign absolute power, together with immunity for past and future violations, to the junta and its chairman. In these the head of the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) is given power to pass any order deemed necessary for strengthening public unity and harmony, or for the prevention, disruption, or suppression of any act that undermines public peace and order or national security, the monarchy, national economics, or administration of state affairs. Overall, the interim constitution places the NCPO beyond the reach of the law, even when its actions result in human rights violations and “intend[s] to shift the balance of power in Thai politics away from the competitive politicians and political parties who dominated since the beginning of the 21st century back to the civil-military bureaucrats seen in the 1980s.”¹⁹ In this sense, the interim constitution is but a symptom of Thailand's relapse, confirmed by Prayuth's unprecedented centralization of power.

Differently from the leaders of the 2006 coup, Prayuth set himself up to become a formidable political player, not just a puppet in the hands of the network monarchy that many claimed him to be in the immediate aftermath of his seizure of power.²⁰ The first signs of this shift were given by the coup's soft reliance on the palace's public support. The general paid lip-service to the monarchy, which remains a major legitimizing force behind the army's actions. But, overall, Prayuth seems more interested in a personal bid for power—which will put him in control when the royal succession takes place—than in

¹⁸The new constitution has just been redrafted, after the previous version was rejected by the army-appointed National Reform Council in September 2015. The new draft is largely based on the spirit of the interim constitution.

¹⁹Kraprayoon Jam, “The More Things Change: Analysing the 2014 Thai Interim Constitution,” *Constitution Unit*, September 8, 2014, <https://constitution-unit.com/2014/09/08/the-more-things-change-analysing-the-2014-thai-interim-constitution/> (accessed February 21, 2016); see also International Commission of Jurists, “Thailand: Interim Constitution Seems to Ignore Key Pillars of Rule of Law,” press release, July 24, 2014, <http://www.icj.org/thailand-interim-constitution-seems-to-ignore-key-pillars-of-rule-of-law/> (accessed February 21, 2016).

²⁰Duncan McCargo, “Network Monarchy and Legitimacy Crises in Thailand,” *Pacific Review* 18, no. 4 (2005): 499–519.

servicing the wishes of the hailing monarch. This has been confirmed by the multiple positions he grabbed. Without any experience in state administration, he appointed himself as chairman of fifteen committees overseeing the national security and economy, including the Board of Investment, the National Energy Policy Committee, and the Special Economic Zone Development Committee. On top of this, on August 4, 2014, he was appointed prime minister. At this point, he was chairman of the NCPO, chief of the Royal Thai Army—although he retired from this position in September and appointed a close ally in his stead—as well as prime minister.

The last time anyone held the three highest positions in the country was between 1971 and 1973, and students rallied together with workers against the dictator Thanom. Even more starkly, the last time a military leader attempted to concentrate power to such an extent was in 1991, and the Thai population responded with massive street protests, the protests that marked the heyday of democratization.²¹ This time, the same urban middle classes who allegedly took the lead in those streets and brought down the military leader are happily shopping in Bangkok, often wearing camouflage t-shirts to show their support for the army.

Remaking Ideology

In order to understand the Thai middle classes' flirtation with anti-democratic politics, it is necessary to analyze their shifting ideological landscape since 2005 and its solidification since the May 2014 coup around two centers of gravity: ultra-royalism and anti-corruption.

Royalist ideology underwent a significant transformation around the 1970s. This discourse framed the king as "sacred, popular and democratic," the divine protector of its popular masses and the father of the nation.²² It was in the 1990s, however, that this form of neo-royalist ideology really gained momentum. The king stopping the 1992 turmoil marked the high watermark of Bhumibol's popularity. Neo-royalism solidified around the image of a benevolent king who intervenes before his children's brawls go too far.²³ On this ground, as the country became more globalized and cosmopolitan, the monarch increasingly embodied the nation, almost to counter-balance the collective anxiety about vanishing national identity and increasing materialism.²⁴ The 1997 economic crisis played a central role in this process. In a famous speech, the king criticized the country's model of growth and introduced the idea of sufficiency economy, a Buddhist-inspired traditionalist economy of moderation and self-reliance that has

²¹James Ockey, *Making Democracy: Leadership, Class, Gender, and Political Participation in Thailand* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004); Kevin Hewison, ed., *Political Change in Thailand: Democracy and Participation* (London: Routledge, 1997).

²²Thongchai Winichakul, "Toppling Democracy," *op cit.* note 10, 21; Paul M. Handley, *The King Never Smiles: A Biography of Thailand's Bhumibol Adulyadej* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2006), 288.

²³Andrew Alan Johnson, "Moral Knowledge and Its Enemies: Conspiracy and Kingship in Thailand," *Anthropological Quarterly* 86, no. 4 (2013): 1059–86, 1070.

²⁴Peter Jackson, "Virtual Divinity: A 21st-Century Discourse of Thai Royal Influence," in *Saying the Unsayable: Monarchy and Democracy in Thailand*, eds. Søren Ivarsson and Lotte Isager (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2010), 29–60, 49.

dominated conservative discourses ever since.²⁵ This confirmed the vision of Bhumibol as the upholder of Thainess and the wise father of the nation. As Borwonsak Uwanno showed, “once the King speaks, all sides will wholeheartedly act accordingly, thereby *miraculously* calming down heated political problems.... Consequently the Thai monarchy has attained a social status as Supreme Arbitrator and Conciliator of the Nation.”²⁶

Particularly since then, the figure of Bhumibol underwent an unprecedented remystification as the *dhammaraja*, the heavenly monarch of Buddhist tradition.²⁷ This refashioning was orchestrated, since its establishment in 2003, by the Ministry of Culture’s propaganda machine, and its effects could be noticed everywhere, from the reintroduction of rituals of loyalty to the monarchy in elite universities to the rise of royal superstars and trendsetters.²⁸ While few critical voices dared to condemn publicly the radicalization of royalist ideology, Yellow Shirts mobilizations coupled this emerging ideological force with the middle classes’ push back against the growing power of elected Prime Minister Thaksin. Until then, royalism and democratic development had gone hand in hand—at least according to orthodox Thai historiography and textbooks. Around the mid-2000s, the two ideologies started to move apart. Faced with a fading monarch and the growing power of democratically elected Thaksin, a large portion of the Yellow Shirts castled around the monarchy.²⁹ Filled with anxiety, neo-royalism morphed into ultra-royalism and put the protection of the sacred monarchy above the preservation of the country’s democracy.³⁰

Large sections of the Thai middle classes followed the shift in royalist ideology, joined the Yellow Shirts, and moved away from supporting democratic electoralism, which had been central to their mobilization in the 1990s.³¹ On one side, many among the Yellow Shirts accused Thaksin of being anti-royalist and a secret republican. On the other, they requested a royal intervention, this time to remove not an illegitimate military dictator but a legally elected and, in their view, corrupt politician. The 2006 coup

²⁵Claudio Sopranzetti, “Burning Red Desires: Isan Migrants and the Politics of Desire in Contemporary Thailand,” *South East Asia Research* 20, no. 3 (2012): 361–79; Kevin Hewison, “Thailand Human Development Report. Sufficiency Economy and Human Development,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 8, no. 1 (2008): 212–19.

²⁶Borwonsak Uwanno, “The Monarchy: Thailand Dhammaraja,” *Bangkok Post*, June 13, 2006.

²⁷Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand against a Historical Background* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

²⁸Michael Kelly Connors, “Hegemony and the Politics of Culture and Identity in Thailand: Ministering Culture,” *Critical Asian Studies* 37, no. 4 (2005): 523–51; Thongchai Winichakul, “The Hazing Scandals in Thailand Reflect Deeper Problems in Social Relations,” *ISEAS Perspective* 56 (2015): 1–9, 5; Krittikarn Sarun, “Entertainment Nationalism: The Royal Gaze and the Gaze at the Royals,” in *Saying the Unsayable: Monarchy and Democracy in Thailand*, eds. Søren Ivarsson and Lotte Isager (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2010), 61–89, 80.

²⁹Johnson, “Moral Knowledge and Its Enemies,” *op. cit.* note 23.

³⁰Thongchai Winichakul, “Thailand’s Royalist Democracy in Crisis,” *Newsletter: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University* 72 (2015): 4.

³¹Clearly this depiction requires a certain degree of generalization. In the PAD, in fact, many did not support the royalist declination of their political objectives but opposed Thaksin on economic and political grounds. For a detailed analysis of the complex composition of the PAD, see Oliver Pye and Wolfram Schaffer, “The 2006 Anti-Thaksin Movement in Thailand: An Analysis,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 38, no. 1 (2006): 38–61.

that ensued was not shy in its references to protecting the monarchy as a major reason behind the military intervention. As a result, ultra-royalism moved from the realm of national and individual ideology to an organizing principle for political mobilization and state administration. The 2007 constitution solidified this new configuration by enshrining the royalist sufficiency economy as the central economic principle for the nation and reducing the power of elected politicians. The military junta that produced this document effectively decoupled royalism and democracy, providing groundwork for the unmaking of democratic administration currently carried out by Prayuth's junta in the name of royalism and anti-corruption.

The opposition between the monarchy—holder of morality and center of the nation—and elected politicians—presented as intrinsically corrupt—has been central to conservative political discourse throughout modern Thai history.³² However, in the last decade the understanding of corruption among the Yellow Shirts underwent a radical transformation. As Aim Sinpeng has shown in her fascinating study of the ideology of corruption among Yellow Shirts supporters, “a corrupt person was no longer just about someone misusing public office for private gain, but also about an immoral, unpatriotic, and disloyal person. These [transformed] corruption into an issue of morality, nationalism, and royalism [composed by] three major discourses of corruption ...: (i) policy-based corruption; (ii) good people; and (iii) electoral corruption.”³³ In this view, elections favor populist leaders who, through corruption and patronage, gain popular support without necessarily producing “good governance,” understood as moral governance that aligns with middle-class sensibilities and royalist attitudes.³⁴ Over the last decade, this view, mixed with a distrust and dismissal of regional and poor voters as unable to resist handouts and to decide what is best for them, has come to dominate the ideology of the urban middle class.³⁵ Through this lens, the anti-Thaksin middle class could preserve its self-representation as holders of “true democracy,” or what the PDRC calls “absolute democracy”—a system that relies on good people who will prioritize the fight against corruption and protection of the monarchy over obtaining electoral majorities—while refusing to accept elections.³⁶ As a

³²Kevin Hewison, “Thailand: Contestation over Elections, Sovereignty and Representation,” *Representation* 51, no. 1 (2015): 51–62; Thongchai Winichakul, “Nationalism and the Radical Intelligentsia in Thailand,” *Third World Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (2008): 575–91.

³³Aim Sinpeng, “Corruption, Morality, and the Politics of Reform in Thailand,” *Asian Politics & Policy* 6, no. 4 (2014): 523–38, 531.

³⁴Kasian Tejapira, “Thammarat/Good Governance in Glocalizing Thailand,” in *Words in Motion: Toward a Global Lexicon*, eds. Carol Gluck and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2009), 306–26.

³⁵Jim Glassman, “The Provinces Elect Governments, Bangkok Overthrows Them’: Urbanity, Class and Post-Democracy in Thailand,” *Urban Studies* 47, no. 4 (2010): 1301–23. Interestingly, similar formulations seem to be on the rise among middle classes around the globe, from Venezuela to Pakistan, from Egypt to Ukraine. Joshua Kurlantzick, *Democracy in Retreat: The Revolt of the Middle Class and the Worldwide Decline of Representative Government* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2013).

³⁶Eli Elinoff, “Unmaking Civil Society: Activist Schisms and Autonomous Politics in Thailand,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 36, no. 3 (2014): 356–85; Erik Martinez Kuhonta and Aim Sinpeng, “Democratic Regression in Thailand: The Ambivalent Role of Civil Society and Political Institutions,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 36, no. 3 (2014): 333–55; Phatharathananunth

result, a large share of the middle classes shifted their class alliances away from the electoral masses toward support for military and royal elites.³⁷

Since the 2014 coup, Prayuth has solidified this convergence by endorsing the two pillars of ultra-royalism and anti-corruption. On one hand, as military takeovers have historically done, he has held that the coup was staged to defend the monarchy and waged an unprecedented war on anybody who dares to criticize the royal institution. On the other, like many coup leaders before him, he has repeatedly referred to corruption as a disease of elected politicians and proposed bureaucratic control as the answer to this conundrum, focusing exclusively on the moral and electoral components of corruption while silencing any critique of policy-based corruption carried out by his government.³⁸ In one of his televised speeches in August 2014, Prayuth declared:

Many people still try to destabilize the situation by using the words “democracy” and “election”. These people do not see that an incomplete democracy is not safe.... The distribution of revenues is unjust, while corruption, wrongful activities, encroachment of natural resources and environment are encouraged, and the public will be told that these things are good, righteous, and beneficial to them.³⁹

Many of Prayuth’s speeches—with their mix of pseudo-democratic rhetoric, “happiness” talk, blunt xenophobia, paternalism, and chauvinism—reveal his endorsement of the Yellow Shirts’ and PDRC’s depiction of democratically elected governments as corrupt parliamentary dictatorships. In June 2014 he said: “We understand that we are living in a democratic world, but we must also examine ourselves to see how Thailand can be resilient in the face of the many challenges that democracy brings.... Parliamentary

Somchai, “Civil Society Against Democracy,” *Cultural Anthropology*, September 23, 2014, <http://www.culanth.org/fieldsights/575-civil-society-against-democracy> (accessed February 22, 2016).

³⁷The definition of middle classes in developing countries has been an object of intensive debates among scholars. See, e.g., Homi Kharas, “The Emerging Middle Class in Developing Countries,” *OECD Development Centre Working Paper* 285 (2010); Abhijit V. Banerjee and Esther Duflo, “What Is Middle Class about the Middle Classes around the World?” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 22, no. 2 (2008): 3–28. Largely, scholars have argued between social designation of class—in terms of positions in society, status, and self-representation—and economic classifications. In this second category, struggling with applying the concept of middle classes to the Global South, scholars have proposed different approaches, one considering class in relative terms—by just selecting people between the 20th and 80th percentile of income and consumption distribution—or in absolute terms—by considering everybody over a specific threshold of expenditure and income. William Easterly, *The Middle Class Consensus and Economic Development* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2000); Surjit S. Bhalla, *Second among Equals: The Middle Class Kingdoms of India and China* (Washington, D.C.: Peterson Institute of International Economics, 2007). I here adopt the first approach and define the middle class in terms of social designation, relying largely on the socially accepted definition in Thailand and self-representation.

³⁸The most prominent case has been the Rajabhakti Park, which the junta concocted in September 2015 to celebrate the Thai monarchy. It has been publicly criticized as a corruption scandal for its unusually high prices for land, materials, construction, and vegetation.

³⁹Thai PBS, “Prayuth Pleads for Cooperation in National Reform While Asking Resistance to Stop,” August 13, <http://englishnews.thaipbs.or.th/content/57001> (accessed February 28, 2016).

dictatorship has to be removed.”⁴⁰ On the whole, the new ideological apparatus proposed by the junta revolves around this idea of electoral democracy as a challenge rather than a solution or a desirable process, a risk both to the royal institution and to anti-corruption forces, something that needs to be controlled and limited through a reformed administration rather than fostered and protected through more participative processes.

Such shifts in ideology, however, cannot occur in an international vacuum. Previous authoritarian phases in Thailand—particularly the period between 1945 and 1992—had been supported, both economically and ideologically, by the United States and its anti-communist rhetoric. Since the coup, the junta has been looking to China for similar patronage by endorsing much of the ideological apparatus that has sustained Chinese anti-democratic governance and strengthening its economic and military ties to the regional superpower. It is no accident that the first government to show international support for the 2014 coup was Beijing. From the pages of *China Daily* the party argued that Western-style democracy has failed in Thailand and opened the door to more direct collaborations with the Thai dictatorship.⁴¹ Since the coup, in fact, the two governments have pushed forward huge infrastructural projects, particularly the high-speed train connecting the two countries, and have begun discussions over the realization of the Kra Isthmus canal. Even more symbolically, in early November 2015, Thailand and China conducted their first joint military exercise, a collaboration historically reserved for the United States.⁴²

Many scholars much better equipped than I have analyzed the evolution and expansion of the China Model in terms of economic policies, market creation, and authoritarianism.⁴³ Rehashing their arguments is beyond the scope of this article. However, for the purpose of sketching out the ideological apparatus of Prayuth's regime, and its international connections, I briefly explore its similarities to dominant discourses in China, in particular its claims to legalism and moral leadership.

In 2002, the 16th Chinese Communist Party Congress marked a turning point in the country's administrative ideology. Ridden by corruption scandals and inefficiencies, the party endorsed a new rhetoric of legalism, as a more efficient system to deal with equal and fair participation. Political scientist Pan Wei, in a famous article that took the shape of a political manifesto for legalism, went to great lengths to show that rule of law canist outside democracy. Such a system, he argued, is preferable and superior to electoral democracy and more appropriate to China. He stated, “The power base of democracy consists of elected law-making offices, mainly parliament and the elected

⁴⁰Royal Thai Government, “National Broadcast by General Prayut Chan-o-cha, Head of the National Council for Peace and Order, on 6 June 2014,” <http://www.thaigov.go.th/index.php/en/announcement-2/item/83768-6-june-2014.html> (accessed February 28, 2016).

⁴¹Patrick Jory, “China Is a Big Winner from Thailand's Coup,” paper presented at East Asia Forum, 2014.

⁴²Richard S. Ehrlich, “China-Thailand Joint Military Exercise Shows Longtime U.S. Ally Bangkok Hedging Its Bets,” *Washington Times*, November 9, 2015.

⁴³Thomas Ambrosio, “The Rise of the ‘China Model’ and ‘Beijing Consensus’: Evidence of Authoritarian Diffusion?” *Contemporary Politics* 18, no. 4 (2012): 381–99; Stefan A. Halper, *The Beijing Consensus: How China's Authoritarian Model Will Dominate the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Basic Books, 2010); Cheng Yung-nien, “The Chinese Model of Development: An International Perspective,” *Social Sciences in China* 31, no. 2 (2010): 44–59.

chief executive. The institutional power base of rule of law consists of non-elected law enforcement offices, mainly civil service and the judiciary.” In this sense, he continued, “rule of law directly answers the most urgent need of Chinese society—curbing corruption in times of market economy. Electoral competition for government offices is not an effective way of curbing corruption; it could well lead to the concentration of power in the hands of elected leaders.”⁴⁴

While not as sophisticated as Professor Pan, and not with the same ability to govern as the Chinese Communist Party, the system Prayuth has in mind, from what we have been able to see so far, looks quite similar. Inspired by what Hu Jintao had done during his presidency, Prayuth is striving to create a legalistic system in Thailand, one in which nonelected officers create and enforce the law, screen members of the Senate, and potentially are appointed as prime ministers, above and beyond the electoral will of their population.⁴⁵ As he declared at an anti-corruption event in June 2015: “Today, I am the one [who] makes the rules. Previous governments couldn’t do that. But today, I make the rules, and all of you have to follow them.”⁴⁶ This transition from a polity in which people make the rules through elected parliamentarians, to one in which the rules are imposed from above for the people and parliament to follow, has been legitimized on a basic principle: the superiority of unelected “good people” over elected politicians in preventing corruption and defending the monarchy, which closely echoes the PDRC ideology.

The alleged superiority of unelected moral actors and legalism is anchored, both for Prayuth and for the Chinese leadership since Hu Jintao, in culturalist understandings and a thin recourse of the discourse of “Asian Values.” Both ideologies hold that the country’s different histories and cultures from the West require different systems of governance. Confucianism in China and royalist-Buddhism in Thailand, they argue, call for the subordination of democratic procedures to morality and good governance—in the case of Thailand to what conservative forces have called “Thai-style democracy.”⁴⁷

Since Prayuth’s rise to power, the Thai dictator has hammered into his population’s minds the necessity of bringing morality and good governance to the forefront of society

⁴⁴Pan Wei, “Toward a Consultative Rule of Law Regime in China,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 12, no. 34 (2003): 3–43, 9.

⁴⁵Thailand has, since 2006, undergone a process of “judicialization of politics and politicization of the judiciary.” Björn Dressel, “Judicialization of Politics or Politicization of the Judiciary? Considerations from Recent Events in Thailand,” *Pacific Review* 23, no. 5 (2010): 671–91. In it, judicial courts and “independent bodies” have intervened heavily to stir political developments, largely away from the decision of electoral forces. Ran Hirschl, “The Judicialization of Mega-Politics and the Rise of Political Courts,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 11 (2008); Duncan McCargo, “Competing Notions of Judicialization in Thailand,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 36, no. 3 (2014): 417–41. The legalism of the junta is, in this sense, a deepening of these tendencies that have emerged throughout Southeast Asia in the last decade. Björn Dressel, “Courts and Judicialization in Southeast Asia,” in *Routledge Handbook of Southeast Asian Democratization*, ed. William Case (London: Routledge, 2015), 268.

⁴⁶“Anti-Junta Protest in Khon Kaen, Despite Prayuth’s Warnings,” *Khaosod English*, June 8, 2015, <http://www.khaosodenglish.com/detail.php?newsid=1433764390> (accessed February 27, 2016).

⁴⁷Kevin Hewison and Kengkij Kitirianglarp, “‘Thai-Style Democracy’: The Royalist Struggle for Thailand’s Politics,” in *Saying the Unsayable: Monarchy and Democracy in Thailand*, eds. Søren Ivarsson and Lotte Isager (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2010), 241–66.

and public administration through similar techniques to the one adopted by Chinese president Hu Jintao. In 2002, the Chinese president released the Eight Honors and Eight Shames.⁴⁸ This list of precepts, from honesty to unity, from discipline to hard work, was to become the new moral yardstick to measure the conduct of Communist Party officials and was diffused through the nation, in schools and government offices. Since his appointment as prime minister, Prayuth has done in Thailand something remarkably similar. With the same purpose of reforming national morality, the Thai dictator has imposed a list of twelve values that provide a blueprint for his vision for Thai society. These include honesty; sacrifice; endurance; gratitude to parents; diligence; morality; discipline; and respect for the law, for tradition, and obviously for the royal institution and its teachings. Thai students around the country are forced to repeat them every morning. The Ministry of Culture has even created a set of emojis for the popular mobile-phone application LINE to help spread them around the country. Through these measures, Prayuth is attempting to displace a process of democratization and increased participation through the language of obedience and morality that had traditionally permeated conservative ideology in Thailand and that closely resonates with Hu Jintao's reforms in China. While schools, as often in state ideology, have taken a central role in diffusing the twelve values, these new teachings have found fertile ground among Thai middle classes who, once paladins of electoral democracy, are now supporting its unmaking.

Remaking Class Alliances

The back-pedaling of large portions of the Thai middle classes away from electoral democracy, under the umbrella of the Yellow Shirts mobilization first and then the PDRC, has been analyzed extensively.⁴⁹ Most recently, a report by the Asia Foundation compared the profile of United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship and PDRC protestors and showed the close relation between Thai middle classes and anti-electoral democracy mobilizations. While age and gender ratios are quite similar between the two movements, the report reveals the middle-class incomes, education levels, and professional paths at the PDRC's core.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, many progressive Thai scholars have refused to acknowledge that electoral democracy and the middle classes have gone adrift. Rather than analyzing these shifting class alliances, these scholars have bent over backwards to demonstrate that Thais who support electoral democracy are indeed from the middle classes, despite their own self-identification, education levels, and political discourse.

⁴⁸Willy Wo-Lap Lam, *Chinese Politics in the Hu Jintao Era: New Leaders, New Challenges* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2006); Xing Guoxin, "Hu Jintao's Political Thinking and Legitimacy Building: A Post-Marxist Perspective," *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 36, no. 4 (2009): 213–26; Zheng Yongnian and Sow Keat Tok, "'Harmonious Society' and 'Harmonious World': China's Policy Discourse under Hu Jintao," *University of Nottingham China Policy Institute Briefing Series* 26 (2007).

⁴⁹Elinoff, "Unmaking Civil Society," and Phatharathananunth Somchai, "Civil Society Against Democracy," *op. cit.* note 36.

⁵⁰Asia Foundation, *Profile of the Protestors: A Survey of Pro and Anti-Government Demonstrators in Bangkok on November 30, 2013* (2013), 5–7.

The most prominent example of this approach is an extensive research project by Apichat Satitniramai, Yukti Mukdawijitra and Niti Pawakapan titled “Reexamining the Political Landscape of Thailand.”⁵¹ Building on the concept of the middle-income peasantry,⁵² but equating income with class, the authors have gone out of their way to demonstrate that the Red Shirt supporters, who protest military and judicial interventions and demand elections, are in fact a new lower middle class. This class, a product of economic and political transformation under Thaksin is, in their view, defined by a monthly income between 5,000 and 10,000 baht (100–200 GBP) and specific needs and aspirations.⁵³ Even though, statistically speaking, this data may be significant—32.6 percent of the Thai population is in that income bracket with 39 percent making less than that and 28.8 percent more—it prioritizes economistic definition of class and ignores social and self-identification.⁵⁴

Firstly, very few in this income group, especially among Red Shirt supporters, self-identify as middle class, but rather talk about themselves as *chonchanlāng*, lower class.⁵⁵ From this position, they may aspire to become middle class—as the three Thai scholars argue—but looking at it from the outside. Secondly, while 68 percent of PDRC supporters hold a bachelor’s degree or a higher educational level—traditionally necessary to access the white-collar jobs that identify the Thai middle classes—only 27 percent of Red Shirts sympathizers do.⁵⁶ Finally, and maybe most importantly, these protesters and their leaders have repeatedly framed their mobilization as a class war between commoners and aristocrats—in which they identify as a lower class—rather than an aspirational movement of the new middle classes.⁵⁷ One is left wondering what is the usefulness of expanding the definition of the middle class to include groups who do not identify with this label and framing their struggle as that of commoners, if not for legitimizing their political demands inside the paradigm that sees the middle classes as the engine of democracy.

This attitude is particularly striking when even Francis Fukuyama, the most prominent proponent of democratization theory, the man who called this trajectory the “end of history,” has recently come around to argue that “middle-class people do not necessarily support democracy in principle: like everyone else, they . . . want to protect their property

⁵¹ Apichat Satitniramai, Yukti Mukdawijitra, and Niti Pawakapan, *Thópthuanphuumí thátkaanm aṅ-thay* [Reexamining the political landscape of Thailand] (Bangkok: Thai Health Promotion Foundation, 2013).

⁵² Andrew Walker, *Thailand’s Political Peasants: Power in the Modern Rural Economy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012).

⁵³ Apichat Satitniramai, Yukti Mukdawijitra, and Niti Pawakapan, *Thópthuanphuumí thátkaanm aṅ-thay*, op. cit. note 51, 131.

⁵⁴ National Statistical Office of Thailand, *Household Socio-Economic Survey* (Bangkok: Ministry of Information and Communication Technology, 2013), 53.

⁵⁵ Claudio Sopranzetti, “The Owners of the Map: Motorcycle Taxi Drivers, Mobility, and Politics in Bangkok,” PhD diss., Harvard University, 2013, 212–16.

⁵⁶ Asia Foundation, *Profile of the Protestors*, op. cit. note 50, 4.

⁵⁷ “Ammat and Phrai: The Facebook War,” *Bangkok Post*, May 15, 2011; Pinkaew Leungaramsri, *Becoming Red = Kamnĕt læ phatthanākān Sīra Dĕng nai Chīang Mai* [Birth and development of the Red Shirt movement in Chiang Mai] (Chiang Mai: Phim khrang thī, 2013); James Buchanan, “Translating Thailand’s Protests: An Analysis of Red Shirt Rhetoric,” *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies* 6, no. 1 (2013): 60–80.

and position. In countries such as China and Thailand, many middle-class people feel threatened by the redistributive demands of the poor and hence have lined up in support of authoritarian governments.”⁵⁸

His matter-of-fact observation, when seen through the lens of the 2014 coup, becomes almost prophetic. Thai traditional middle classes have demonstrated over the last decade that they are more interested in ultra-royalism and stirring political outcomes and administrative structures toward transparency, anti-corruption, and moral good governance than in democracy. As far as these objectives were achievable through electoral democracy, as they have until Thaksin's first reelection in 2005, they supported this system. Faced with the emergence of a regional and diverse electorate that could decide elections and direct resources away from them, large portions of the urban middle classes developed, as we saw, a new definition of corruption, one that equates populism with electoral bribery. Concurrently, threatened by the resulting redistributive policies that take power and resources away from them, they shifted their alliance away from the popular masses toward royal and military elites that propose less democratic and participative forms of governance.⁵⁹ The authoritarian legalism proposed by Prayuth, in this sense, promises them, as long as it generates economic prosperity, the predictability of a “moral” system and the protection of the monarchy, without having to introduce the annoying reliance on keeping the electoral masses satisfied. This, for an entrenched Thai middle class that is so detached from the rest of the country to the point of living inside their air-conditioned houses and offices that materially exist eight degrees below everybody else's, offers an attractive alternative to the redistributive push that emerged from electoral politics, making them the perfect allies for authoritarian regimes, rather than electoral democracies. It is precisely this new alliance that is allowing Prayuth to roll out the long-term reforms that are pushing the Thai body politic into a relapse into dictatorial governance and remystified state ideology that aim at hollowing out democratic governance and allowing a de facto military authoritarian regime to live in its empty shell.

CONCLUSION

In this article I have argued that Prayuth's rise to power is prefiguring Thailand's relapse toward a dictatorial system of governance based around a new administrative structure, ideological apparatus, and class alliance. The 2014 coup marked just the beginning of a potential new trajectory for the country, one that challenges the usual narratives about Thai history and its future. Even if elections will be held in the near future, the new constitution will undoubtedly be based on the junta's principles, making it hard to emend them and almost impossible to throw them out completely. Whether or not this

⁵⁸Francis Fukuyama, “The Future of History: Can Liberal Democracy Survive the Decline of the Middle Class?” *Foreign Affairs* 91 (2012): 56.

⁵⁹Glassman, “The Provinces Elect Governments,” *op. cit.* note 35; Elinoff, “Unmaking Civil Society,” *op. cit.* note 36; Jayasuriya Kanishka and Kevin Hewison, “The Antipolitics of Good Governance: From Global Social Policy to a Global Populism?” *Critical Asian Studies* 36, no. 4 (2004): 571–90.

transformation will succeed, which remains impossible for anyone to predict, Prayuth is driving a new swing of the pendulum between dictatorial conservatism and democratic rule that has dominated contemporary Thai history.⁶⁰ Before the 2014 coup, many scholars—including myself—believed a return to military rule was unthinkable, if not at the risk of a widespread uprising.⁶¹ We were wrong. As events have proven, Thailand's democratization remains constantly haunted by the possibility of relapses into authoritarian rule. The May 2014 coup, I argued, revealed some of its symptoms. This is not to say that a new linear narrative of de-democratization has taken over and is now destined to succeed. Rather, these political transformations remain open-ended and their outcomes determined by specific political actions, economic decisions, and social forces rather than by necessary and impersonal engines of history. Thus this analysis calls for the necessity of active political engagement rather than passive reliance on teleological narratives or “wait-it-out” approaches. Thailand is relapsing and, if we ignore it, we may fail, as we did before the 2014 coup, to diagnose the creation of a new sociopolitical alignment and prepare to weather its effects.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Anand Vaidya, David Gellner, Lizzie Presser, Michael Kebede, Pavin Chachavalpongpun, and Tyrell Haberkorn for reading previous versions of this article. Special thanks go to the three anonymous reviewers who have contributed to making this piece stronger.

⁶⁰Stent, “Thoughts on Thailand’s Turmoil,” *op. cit.* note 4.

⁶¹Hewison, “Avoiding Conflict,” *op. cit.* note 11.