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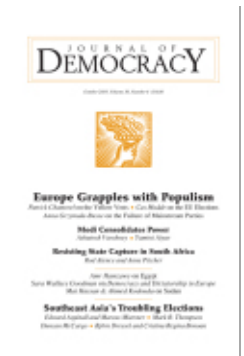
Southeast Asia's Troubling Elections: Democratic Demolition in Thailand

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Southeast Asia's Troubling Elections

DEMOCRATIC DEMOLITION IN THAILAND

Duncan McCargo

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Thailand has been engaged in a process of democratic demolition. Electoral and parliamentary systems that worked fairly well have been replaced by dubious successors. The once-respected electoral-administration body has become hopelessly politicized. Established political parties have fallen on hard times, while the March 2019 parliamentary election saw an opportunistic military-aligned party secure a larger popular-vote share than any other single party. The military junta that seized power in May 2014 remains in control. It lacks majority support, but its opponents are unable to dislodge it. The recently crowned monarch, a more assertive figure than his late father, gave a sign of things to come when he made two overt political interventions during the campaign season.

The 2019 election results emerged from a deeply flawed process: Promises of reform made at the time of the 2014 coup were broken, and five years later the generals' clique that had seized power back then spared no manipulation in their effort to retain it.¹ Opposition parties that believe in rolling back the authority of the military and the royalist establishment won the voting, but the junta rewrote the rules so that General Prayuth Chan-ocha could hold on to the premiership. Despite military rhetoric about curtailing political divisions and "restoring national happiness," the election intensified polarization, adding a generational divide to ideological, personalistic, and regional cleavages.

A rare combination of vigorous electoral politics, an activist citizenry, an intervention-loving military, and a meddling monarchy makes Thailand's politics dynamic to the point of instability. Since 2005, the country has been through six general elections, two of which (2006 and

2014) were annulled by the courts, with military coups following in both cases. Bangkok has been periodically wracked by massive street protests, often lasting for weeks or months. The most intense bout of unrest, in 2010, saw about a hundred people lose their lives, most of them unarmed demonstrators shot by soldiers. Three new constitutions have been drafted (in 2007, 2015, and 2017), and two temporary constitutions have been promulgated (in 2006 and 2014).

Yellow versus Red

Polarization has been a feature of Thai national life since the Yellow Shirt movement began holding protests in late 2005. This evolving movement represents a backlash against the controversial figure of Thaksin Shinawatra, the police officer turned telecommunications tycoon who was prime minister from 2001 until the 2006 coup ousted him.² Thaksin left the country more than ten years ago—he faces jail time on corruption-related charges—but remains a dominant figure in Thai political life. His younger sister, Yingluck Shinawatra, served as prime minister from 2011 to 2014, when the most recent coup overthrew her.

At age 70, Thaksin is a larger-than-life character of immense drive and energy. During his time as premier he gained unprecedented control over the bureaucracy, and built up a virtual cult following in the North and Northeast, which together are home to about thirty-million of Thailand's roughly seventy-million people. His Thai Rak Thai party mixed old-school machine politics with bold policy initiatives, including a low-cost healthcare program and a moratorium on farmers' debt. He put loyalists in every key post, and he used a weekly television show to speak directly with voters. Warmly embraced at first by the palace and the traditional elite, he soon incurred their wrath by failing to demonstrate the required degree of deference.

Demonstrators wearing yellow, the color traditionally associated with the monarchy on whose behalf they claimed to be acting, began turning out against Thaksin in late 2005. They branded him a traitor to the nation and the royal institution. After Thaksin's September 2006 ouster, his supporters formed their own red-shirted mass movement, members of which suffered most of the fatalities in the 2010 Bangkok protests. The trauma of that year, demonstrating the military's willingness to stop at nothing in crushing the pro-Thaksin side, has cast a long shadow over Thailand's politics.

Did Thaksin really pose an existential challenge to the Thai establishment? He generally acted as a pragmatist more than an ideologue. The Red Shirts included hard-line critics of the monarchy, but successive pro-Thaksin governments did nothing to challenge the privileges of the crown or the generals. Neither Thaksin nor Yingluck shrank the

military's bloated budget or reined in rising hyper-royalism. Despite his pragmatism, Thaksin could at times overplay his hand: In late 2013, eager to return to Thailand, he made an ill-fated effort via Yingluck's government to ram an unpopular amnesty bill through parliament.

This was a grave blunder. It triggered fresh protests that closed key intersections, occupied government buildings, and helped to provide the pretext for the May 2014 coup. General Prayuth seized power at the head of a junta called the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO). Later, he made himself prime minister. The NCPO suppressed all political activity, arguing that it bred too much conflict and disorder.

The polarization over Thaksin followed regional and class lines. Pro-Thaksin parties were strongest in the country's populous North and Northeast, where average income levels were significantly lower than in other parts of Thailand. Between 2011 and 2014, more than twenty-thousand communities in these regions proclaimed themselves "Red Shirt villages" loyal to Thaksin and to ideas of democracy—a development that understandably alarmed the military.

Written off and patronized by national elites as disgruntled and ill-informed "poor farmers," Thaksin's political base included ambitious, aspirational voters. Many of them had provincial roots but worked in the greater Bangkok area, which contains close to eight-million people. Such "urbanized villagers," registered to vote in the countryside but effectively city-dwellers, epitomized Thailand's political contradictions. While they often lacked job security and were caught in debt, their income levels were not far from those of their more settled middle-class counterparts. Urbanized villagers planned to send their children to college and had no wish to work as farmers: Wherever possible, they employed others (often migrants from Burma or Cambodia) to tend their family fields and rice paddies. Thaksin, himself a native of the northern city of Chiang Mai, spoke the language of these voters. They welcomed both his populist policies and his critical stance toward the self-regarding bureaucrats, military officers, and aristocrats who believed that they were entitled to rule the country with an eye to their own interests.

Thaksin's ability to win electoral majorities challenged the traditional elite's longstanding dominance. During the 1980s and 1990s, elected governments had been unsteady coalitions of small parties, constantly consumed by reshuffles and rambunctious no-confidence debates. The 1997 Constitution ushered in an extended period of two-party dominance, replacing parliamentary dysfunction with political polarization.

Opposing Thaksin's electoral dominance was the storied Democrat Party, founded in 1946. Although at times the Democrats had opposed military rule, by the twenty-first century the party was staunchly conservative and royalist. But the Democrats had not convincingly won a

general election since 1986: Their base lay in Bangkok and in Southern Thailand, home to only about nine-million people. Many Democrat supporters were public-sector employees—civil servants, teachers, and military or medical personnel—who were anxious to defend their status and privileges amid rapid economic growth and social transformation. There was a close association between the Democrats and the Yellow Shirts.

Both the Democrats and the yellow-shirted groups, however, were fronts for bigger players: the military and the monarchy. The Thai military (especially the Royal Thai Army) leads the world in staging coups: Since 1932, Thai soldiers have staged about twenty coups, roughly half of which have succeeded. The army feels strongly entitled to intervene in politics on behalf of its corporate interests, under cover of ensuring order and stability. In recent decades, successful coups have normally received the endorsement, active or passive, of the enormously influential monarchy.

The political role of the monarchy is the elephant in the antechamber of Thai politics: It may not often be openly discussed, but you cannot help noticing it on the way in. At various points during the long “Ninth Reign” of Bhumibol Adulyadej (who sat on the throne as King Rama IX from 1946 to 2016), royal interventions were made visible. He welcomed student protesters onto the palace grounds in October 1973, triggering the collapse of a longstanding military regime; three years later, he welcomed the military back. In 1981, he flew to Korat in Northeast Thailand to show his opposition to a coup attempt, thereby thwarting it. In May 1992, he famously summoned two rival generals, one of whom had led a coup and the other of whom was leading protests against it, for a televised joint dressing-down that effectively ended each man’s political career.

But most royal politicking during the Ninth Reign took place behind closed doors. Reluctant to spell out his wishes directly, Bhumibol created a “network monarchy” of allies, courtiers, and sympathizers who acted relatively freely on his behalf.³ The refrain of Ninth Reign royalism was always the same: Elected politicians were not to be trusted; mass political mobilization was a threat to order and stability; ultimate wisdom and moral authority rested in the monarchy and especially the king himself; rural Thais should be content to live simply and shun consumerism.

Yet there were differences of opinion within the monarchical network. Military hard-liners urged draconian clampdowns, while royal liberals called for constitutional reforms and the expansion of civil society. The latter were hoping to craft a political system strong enough to survive the post-Bhumibol royal succession. Unable or unwilling to make a clear choice between these alternative approaches following the rise of Thaksin, the ailing king largely withdrew after the 2006 coup,

spending much of his final decade in Bangkok's Siriraj Hospital. The monarchy became less a palpable presence than a tangible absence, and liberal royalists gradually lost faith in their original project.

The Ultimate Coup

Into the vacuum of the king's later years stepped the military. The 22 May 2014 coup d'état was meant to be the coup to end all coups. Unlike the February 1991 or September 2006 coupmakers, the NCPO did not promise elections within a year, and it displayed an unusual reluctance to compose a new constitution. It took the new junta three months even to announce a cabinet. The NCPO claimed to be engaged in a process of "national reform"—riffing on the slogan "reform before election," which had been an anti-Thaksin mantra. The junta eventually crafted a twenty-year "National Reform Plan" that any subsequent elected government was obliged to follow. Yet even though there was widespread public support for revamping the public sector, including the dysfunctional police force and the failing school system, the NCPO failed to undertake any substantive policy reforms of its own.

Instead, the junta reformed away the more democratic features of the post-1997 political order. The idea of a wholly or partly elected upper house was abandoned in favor of a military-appointed 250-member Senate. A new multi-member apportionment (MMA) electoral system was introduced for the 500-member House of Representatives. The MMA system was carefully designed to reduce the dominance of Thaksin's new Pheu Thai Party.⁴ Finally, the NCPO brought in an interim provision whereby the premier would be chosen by a joint session of the two houses, a step meant to extend the junta's political dominance past the election. Taken together, these provisions spelled a return to the unstable multiparty politics of the 1980s and 1990s, a time of frequent elections and shifting coalition governments orchestrated by military-aligned brokers and dealmakers. Such a politics might have its drawbacks, but it was less likely to be dominated by parties and voters loyal to Thaksin, and this recommended it to the military.

Still, the generals were in the ironic position of having shut down the country's political system on grounds of poor performance, only to replace it with one guaranteed to function even less well: The NCPO had deliberately vandalized Thailand's parliament, thereby further institutionalizing a guardian role for the military and a central position for the postsuccession monarchy.

The death of King Bhumibol at age 88 on 13 October 2016 was a transformative moment. His anointed successor, Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn (b. 1952), was unpopular with the public; he lived most of the year in Germany and was viewed as a self-centered playboy who had done little to bond with the Thai people. Many Thais had long hoped that

he would be passed over so that his well-liked younger sister, Princess Sirindhorn (b. 1955), could ascend the throne. But the generals pledged their loyalty and support to the crown prince, and on 1 December 2016 he became King Rama X.

Unlike his father, the new king did not hesitate to exert personal control over matters affecting his interests. He took over the assets of the wealthy Crown Property Bureau and formed his own guard unit of several thousand troops. One night in April 2017, a plaque commemorating the demise of the absolute monarchy in 1932 vanished from the Royal Plaza. Near the end of 2018, the large Constitution Defense Monument that stood in Laksi Circle to recall the suppression of a royalist counter-revolution suffered a similar fate. These mysterious events suggested a desire to rewrite the country's modern history. Properties adjoining royal compounds in central Bangkok's Dusit District were reclaimed by the palace. They included a racecourse, the city zoo, and even the parliament building—the last of which was promptly demolished.

The new king had enjoyed good relations with Thaksin during the early years of his premiership. Thaksin had caused an uproar in 2010 with an interview in which he had said that he looked forward to a “shining” era in the next reign. Rightly or wrongly, many Thaksin supporters believed the prince to be sympathetic to their cause. In 2014, Red Shirts camped for weeks outside his home wearing T-shirts professing their love for him. To date, however, this love has elicited no obvious response in kind. Thaksin has received no royal pardon or summons to come back home, and this despite the new king's taste for exerting power directly: While the father had expected the monarchical network to improvise policy without specific instructions, the son sees it mainly as a tool for carrying out royal orders. So far, the king's increasing exercise of power has directly affected military officers and bureaucrats, but has not had much impact on citizens at large.

The Context of the 2019 Elections

The 2019 elections went forward only after repeated delays. The NCPO's stalling tactics involved having a new constitution written in 2015, then rejecting it and ordering a fresh document via a new drafting process, and finally holding an August 2016 referendum on what became the 2017 Constitution. The conduct of the 2016 referendum set the stage for the conduct of the 2019 election: The junta sought to quash competing views while pushing for a “yes” vote, politicizing the supposedly independent Election Commission of Thailand (ECT) in the process. These efforts yielded a 61 percent majority for the new basic law, but the campaign revealed a deeply split country and the existence of considerable frustration with the military regime.⁵

Early in 2018, parties planning to contest the election were allowed

to register. In the months that followed, dozens did, most of them new. Major existing parties included the pro-Thaksin Pheu Thai Party (the putative frontrunner), the anti-Thaksin Democrats, and the established, medium-sized Bhum Jai Thai and Chart Thai Pattana parties. The most important of the new parties on the promilitary side were the Palang Pracharath Party—a vehicle for the NCPO—and the Action Coalition for Thailand, a party closely linked to the anti-Thaksin Yellow Shirts. New parties opposing the military included Thai Raksa Chart (closely linked to Pheu Thai) and the youth-oriented Future Forward Party, led by progressive 40-year-old auto-parts billionaire Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit.

The 2017 Constitution had been designed to bring back multiparty government, so both the Democrats and Pheu Thai had to seek coalition partners. In practice, the likely outlines of the rival coalitions were clear from the outset. Pheu Thai would try to gain enough seats to lead an alliance including Future Forward and Thai Raksa Chart. If this grouping comprised significantly more than 200 seats, there was a good chance that Chart Thai Pattana would join it. The Democrats were in a more difficult position; while they insisted that they supported parliamentary democracy, their most obvious natural allies were Palang Pracharath and Bhum Jai Thai (which had joined them in a controversial coalition government from late 2008 to 2011).

The wild card was the unelected 250-member Senate. Members of both chambers would jointly elect the premier. Thus, even if a coalition opposed to the military were to win a House majority, General Prayuth would need to add only 126 House votes to his unanimous Senate support in order to reach the magic number of 376 and become prime minister. The military's coalition could lose the election yet still choose the premier. With only minority support in the lower chamber, Prayuth might struggle to pass laws, but Thai parliaments have seldom done much legislating anyway.

The conditions under which the 2019 polls went forward were hardly fair or free. Following the 2014 coup, the NCPO had summoned hundreds of politicians and activists to military camps for “attitude adjustments,” arrested protesters, charged dozens of people with *lèse-majesté* offenses, tightly censored critical news coverage, and banned gatherings of more than four people. Under Article 44 of the interim constitution—an article that remained in force throughout the campaign even though technically it should have been superseded by the Constitution of 2017—General Prayuth wielded absolute power to override existing laws and procedures and to transfer or fire officials. Restrictions on political activity were lifted only in February 2019, and the junta's intimidation tactics never ceased.

The ECT, first established under the 1997 Constitution, is supposed to manage elections in an independent, nonpartisan fashion. Under pres-

sure from anti-Thaksin forces, however, it has lost its neutrality. During the February 2014 polls, it colluded with an opposition boycott that led to the annulment of the voting. During the August 2016 constitutional referendum, the ECT issued a bizarre leaflet extolling the supposed virtues of the draft constitution, then failed to uphold the rights of those campaigning against it.

During the 2019 campaign, the commissioners backed complaints against opposition parties while failing to take action against Palang Pracharath. On election night, the ECT violated its own rules by halting the vote count. After the polls closed, as later became known, the commissioners changed the formula for calculating the distribution of party-list seats in a way that favored the promilitary coalition. When, a full month after the election, the ECT at last released final results, the pro-junta coalition was in a position to form a government.

The Major Parties

Five parties dominated the voting. Military-backed Palang Pracharath (just under 24 percent) edged out pro-Thaksin Pheu Thai (22.2 percent), though Pheu Thai won twenty more seats (136 to 116). In third place was Future Forward (17.7 percent and 81 seats). Two opportunistic parties of ambiguous political stance came next: the Democrats (11.2 percent, 53 seats) and Bhum Jai Thai (10.5 percent, 51 seats). They would both end up in bed with the military.

Pheu Thai had been the early favorite. Pro-Thaksin parties had won each of the previous four elections, and its base in the North and Northeast was strong. Yingluck Shinawatra, the former Pheu Thai premier, had in August 2017 followed her brother into exile to avoid jail, triggering a wave of popular sympathy. All opinion polls consistently suggested that the party would win the March 2019 election hands-down.

But Pheu Thai faced some serious challenges. During his more than a decade in exile, Thaksin's once-gleaming brand had become tarnished, and his party was not unified around a clear leader. Pheu Thai's greatest challenge, however, was an inability to appeal to the middle ground. With its top-down structure, Pheu Thai found it hard to bring in outsiders and relate to younger people. First-time voters felt disconnected from the polarized, Thaksin-centered politics of the past two decades. For dissatisfied former Yellow Shirts, meanwhile, Pheu Thai did not provide the kind of pragmatic alternative that the eminently likeable Yingluck had offered in 2011. In short, Pheu Thai's appeal was not widening.

In addition, the arcane rules of the new voting system meant that, although Pheu Thai secured 136 constituencies, it failed to win a single party-list seat: A party that under many other electoral systems would have performed very strongly was instead punished for its success.

While some of Pheu Thai's seat loss—a reduction of 129 compared to 2011—could be blamed on the new electoral system, it also drew eight-million fewer votes than it had won in 2011.

Like Pheu Thai, Future Forward opposed the military and demanded the restoration of open electoral politics. But while Future Forward lacked a solid core vote or a regional base, it boasted in Thanathorn an exceptionally popular young leader who could attract both first-time voters and former Democrat Party supporters. Most analysts were initially skeptical that Future Forward could make a substantial breakthrough in a constituency-based system, given the lack of well-known candidates aside from Thanathorn himself.

The ability of Future Forward to win 81 seats, including 31 representing constituencies, was among the most astounding features of the election. About every fifth person who voted in 2019 had never done so before. The party's appeal to these seven-million or so first-time voters was extraordinary. To a large degree, this success came from what Future Forward was not: It was not stuffy, not patronizing, not self-important, and not mired in the messy recent past of Thai politics. As one activist explained to me, the party was set up to “oppose hierarchism”—a message that resonated powerfully with Thailand's millennials. The party proved adept at using social media; short clips of Thanathorn's televised debate performances went viral online. As the campaign unfolded, he became a master of using sound bites to puncture Thailand's prevailing culture of deference and public banalities. His public criticisms of the military could be bold to the point of unthinkable. On 17 March, he challenged the army commander by name, asking him if he would dare to come to parliament after the election and shoot Thanathorn and the other 499 MPs.⁶

Palang Pracharath set out to steal Pheu Thai's thunder with policies that were targeted at lower-income voters and crafted by the same technocrat who had drawn up Thaksin's original platform back in 2001. Taking another page from Thaksin's playbook, Palang Pracharath built its candidate list by recruiting former MPs with strong networks of local vote canvassers. Palang Pracharath used a mix of threats and inducements. Politicians who joined the military-backed party were allegedly paid generous under-the-table “transfer fees,” and the many prospective candidates who faced possible conviction in corruption or protest-related cases were promised leniency. In some areas, the party wielded patronage or ballot-buying to mobilize voters, or had military officers order village notables to rally the locals.⁷ In other places, however, Palang Pracharath triumphed as the “stop Thaksin” party. These areas included fourteen of Bangkok's thirty constituencies, many of them in the capital's central districts. Late in the campaign, General Prayuth's face appeared on posters around Bangkok, but his unpopular visage was nowhere to be seen in the North and Northeast.

The Democrats' fourth-place showing revealed a shocking decline. Thailand's oldest party finished with just 3.9 million votes—more than 7.4 million below the number that it had won in 2011. Remarkably, the Democrats failed to win a single seat in the capital, one of their traditional strongholds. Eight years earlier, they had carried 23 of the 33 Bangkok seats. Nearly all remaining Democrat seats were in the South; a leading national party had shrunk to regional status.

The Democrats' collapse reflected their ambiguous attitude toward the junta. Their base split off in two directions. The insistence of long-time party leader and former premier Abhisit Vejjajiva that he would not back General Prayuth for the premiership alienated many in the old Democrat core, and they shifted to Palang Pracharath. More liberal Democrats, meanwhile, switched to Future Forward. The abysmal 2019 result spurred Abhisit's immediate resignation. His successor, Southerner Jurin Laksanawisit, joined forces with Palang Pracharath and voted for the general to stay on as premier.

It was no surprise that Bhum Jai Thai took its 51 seats into the promilitary ruling coalition. Thanks to its strategy of buying up electable candidates, especially in the Northeast, and focusing on winnable seats, Bhum Jai Thai was the only "old" party to improve its electoral performance from 2011 to 2019.

Unusual Royal Proclamations

On the face of things, Thailand in 2019 held a "normal" election in which voters listened to a range of parties and made informed choices. But this surface account omits two extremely important royal interventions that played a significant role in shaping the results.

One of the most extraordinary days in Thai political history came about six weeks before the election, on 8 February 2019. Under the post-2017 election law, all parties had to name up to three candidates for premier in advance of the election. That morning, the newly formed, Thaksin-aligned Thai Raksa Chart Party nominated Ubolratana Mahidol (b. 1951), the king's older sister, as its sole candidate for premier. The late king's eldest child (her charitable foundation is called "To Be Number One"), she was a self-styled "freelancer," a singer, actress, and Instagram influencer who had been officially ousted from the royal family and "de-princessed" after marrying an American and moving to the United States in the 1970s. After divorcing in 1998, she returned to Thailand and was largely rehabilitated—but still lacked a proper royal title.

Both the Thai Raksa Chart Party and Ubolratana herself insisted that she was no longer a princess. In practice, however, she enjoyed royal privileges, including travel by motorcade with the police clearing traffic. On the nomination form, she gave her address as Bangkok's Grand

Palace, hardly the domicile of a commoner. Her nomination sent social media into a frenzy. Thaksin supporters hailed the move as a master stroke that would force the junta onto the defensive: How could General Prayuth run for the premiership against the king's sister? Supporters of the military, meanwhile, saw a sinister plot by Thaksin to use the monarchy for his own ends. Most of Thailand's royalists are devoted admirers of the late King Bhumibol and his second daughter, Princess Sirindhorn. They hold other members of the royal family in much lower regard, as the online outpouring of anti-Ubolratana sentiment made clear on February 8.

Conservative hostility toward Ubolratana's nomination was not simply an expression of alarm at the blurring of lines between the monarchy—supposedly “above politics”—and the country's electoral competition. Thai Raksa Chart was not just any political party: Running candidates in about a hundred constituencies, it had been designed to forge a pro-Thaksin coalition government in alliance with Pheu Thai. Thaksin and Ubolratana were known to have personal ties: In July 2018, she had posted Instagram images of herself and Thaksin attending the World Cup final in Moscow. The former premier, who had for a time enjoyed good relations with the current king when the latter was crown prince, hoped that through Ubolratana he might return to Thailand and even to political power. Royalist revulsion at this prospect lay behind the denunciations of Ubolratana's nomination.

Before February 8 was over, the Ubolratana episode ended badly. That night, King Vajiralongkorn issued an extraordinary statement calling his sister's nomination “inappropriate”—and she promptly withdrew it.⁸ A few days later, the ECT petitioned the Constitutional Court to dissolve Thai Raksa Chart. A month after the ill-considered nomination, the party had ceased to exist, and its executive members were banned from politics for ten years. The legal basis for the dissolution was highly questionable: In effect, the party was abolished for displeasing the king. The dissolution shredded Thaksin's electoral strategy. His main party, Pheu Thai, had deliberately avoided fielding candidates in districts where Thai Raksa Chart had people running. The most immediate effect was to boost Future Forward's vote in the constituencies where Pheu Thai had fielded no candidate.

Huge questions remained unanswered: What did the king know, and when did he know it? Whose idea had this been? As early as 2017, Thaksin had discussed with aides the idea of putting Ubolratana forward for the premiership, and the nomination was widely leaked on social media a few days in advance. The king must have been aware of the plan, therefore, and one phone call from his lakeside villa south of Munich would have been enough to halt the proceedings. Competing theories abound: Did the king encourage the nomination, only to reverse course when the royalist reaction turned out to be so hostile? Did he stand back

and allow his sister to go ahead in order to test the waters? Or did Ubolratana surprise her brother by daring to accept the nomination without first seeking his blessing?

It is hard to imagine what sort of prime minister the solipsistic Ubolratana might have made, but we will never know. One thing is clear, however: Allowing a member of the royal family to become chief executive would have set an extremely dangerous precedent.

The dissolution of Thai Raksa Chart did not end the saga, however. On the evening of March 22, just two days before the polls, Ubolratana attended the Hong Kong wedding reception of Thaksin's daughter. The princess and Thaksin were photographed publicly embracing.⁹ The pair were at it again, flaunting their connection for maximum attention—and political impact. The king reacted with another late-night proclamation, issued on election eve, urging Thai voters to choose “good people.”¹⁰

This was clearly an injunction to support those loyal to the military and to General Prayuth, and it undoubtedly contributed to a further polarization of the electorate. But the second royal proclamation had an additional, unintended consequence: It triggered an antipaternalist backlash from younger voters. A hashtag that roughly translates as “We are grown up now and will decide for ourselves” topped the Thai Twitterverse as election day began.¹¹ Thaksin's antics surely increased the vote for Palang Pracharath; but the two royal proclamations gave a huge election boost to Future Forward.

Results and Aftermath

Thai election results are generally known on the night of the polls, but late in the evening of March 24 the ECT ordered counting to stop. Constituency results were declared a few days later.¹² Pheu Thai, having won a plurality of those seats, announced that it planned to form a seven-party coalition government. Party-list allocations, however, were not released by the ECT until May 8, following the new king's coronation on May 4. The long hiatus was explained as a measure to let the country focus on the royal ceremonies. However that may have been, the delay also gave Palang Pracharath time to negotiate with—read “incentivize”—prospective coalition partners, while the ECT cooked up a new formula for allocating party-list seats that benefited pliable minor parties at the expense of those hostile to the military interest.

This brazen rewriting of the electoral rulebook allowed Palang Pracharath to cobble together an unwieldy twenty-party coalition with a tiny parliamentary majority. After much prevarication, a June 5 joint session of the two chambers reappointed General Prayuth as prime minister by 500 votes to 244. The atmosphere during the nomination process was extremely heated, resembling a no-confidence debate over

the absent general's previous performance as premier: Thanathorn was permitted to take his seat but was then immediately suspended owing to some tendentious charges leveled against him.

With General Prayuth returned to office, another lengthy hiatus ensued—this time it was the interminable wait for a new cabinet to be announced. The media spoke of infighting among the coalition partners, but the likely reason lay elsewhere: As soon as a new administration began, the NCPO would be over, and Prayuth would lose the absolute powers granted by Article 44. The junta was deliberately postponing the date of its own dissolution. The NCPO had never really wanted an election, and for months after the balloting it found ways to keep the results from being implemented. When the 36-member cabinet list appeared on July 10, it was a grave disappointment. Prayuth's closest NCPO allies retained their prized positions; the ministerial line-up was largely a mix of old generals and machine politicians, some with well-known links to organized crime. Not a single woman received a full ministerial post. Was this really the reformed political order led by “good people” that the Thai public had hoped for?

The election results told a simple story: Thailand went from two major parties to five. Compared with 2011, Pheu Thai lost nearly 8 million votes and the Democrats close to 7 million, while among the new parties Palang Pracharath picked up nearly 8.5 million and Future Forward more than 6 million. Progressive voters moved left, and conservatives moved right: The center did not hold. Exactly five years after the May 2014 coup, Thailand was much more polarized than before, and had added a new generational cleavage: Young people were now deeply alienated from the junta and the political status quo, eagerly embracing Thanathorn's Future Forward as a symbol of optimism and opportunity.

On one level, Thailand is a classic example of democratic backsliding.¹³ After seizing power in 2014, the military junta repeatedly postponed elections, devised an arcane electoral system to serve its own purposes, banned one prominent opposition party in the middle of the election, harassed another rival party, and changed the electoral system after the results were in. Even after the new parliament was convened, human-rights activists were repeatedly beaten up, and the regime continued to issue menacing military-style pronouncements—including coded threats of a possible further coup. It is unclear how long General Prayuth's wafer-thin majority in the lower house will last, or whether he will really tolerate critical parliamentary questioning by opposition politicians whom he plainly views with contempt.

Yet Thailand's growing authoritarianism is not simply a product of military interventions.¹⁴ It also reflects the preferences of the new king. He admires order, discipline, and control, and has shown no sympathy for popular politics, protests, or the open exchange of ideas. What might be termed the junta's “strategic procrastinations”—the delaying of elec-

tions, of the announcement of election results, and of the formation of a new government—may have been prompted by cues from the palace. Will the “Prayuth 2.0” government represent a reversion to the semidemocracy of the 1980s? Or is the new cabinet merely a parliamentary façade fronting a drift toward absolute monarchy?

Can the newly “elected” government refuse to do anything the king asks? If decades of hyper-royalism have made all royal wishes sacrosanct, then Thailand cannot even be considered a semidemocracy.

Or is the new cabinet merely a parliamentary façade fronting a drift toward absolute monarchy?

The election campaign demonstrated the new king’s willingness to intervene directly in politics. The crucial question is: Can the newly “elected” government refuse to do anything the king asks? If decades of hyper-royalism have made all royal wishes sacrosanct, then Thailand cannot even be considered a semidemocracy.

When the new cabinet was sworn in before the king on July 16, General Prayuth omitted a crucial sentence from the oath of office: His ministers pledged their allegiance to the throne, but not to the constitution. Despite a barrage of criticism, Prayuth declined to correct the error. Instead, in a curious morale-boosting ceremony on August 27, each minister was presented with a framed message of support from the king himself.

At the end of 2018, Thailand’s parliament building was literally taken over by the palace and demolished. In the months that followed, did the institution of parliament suffer some version of the same fate? Were the country’s ministers still bound by the constitution? The verdict is still out, although developments such as the runaway electoral success of Future Forward and the unprecedentedly frank televised campaign debates offer some grounds for continuing optimism. We need to find compelling ways of understanding and characterizing Thailand’s evolving political order, which will certainly require careful monitoring in the years ahead.

NOTES

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1. See Michael J. Montesano, Terence Chong, and Mark Heng, eds., *After the Coup: The National Council for Peace and Order Era and the Future of Thailand*, (Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019).

2. On Thaksin, see Duncan McCargo and Ukrist Pathmanand, *The Thaksinization of Thailand* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2005).

3. Duncan McCargo, "Network Monarchy and Legitimacy Crises in Thailand," *Pacific Review* 18 (December 2005): 499–519.

4. Allen Hicken and Bangkok Pundit, "Thailand's New Electoral System," *Thai Data Points*, 7 June 2019, www.thaidatapoints.com/post/thai-election-pending-5.

5. Duncan McCargo, Saowanee T. Alexander, and Petra Desatova, "Ordering Peace: Thailand's 2016 Constitutional Referendum," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 39 (April 2017): 65–95.

6. I heard Thanathorn say this during a televised debate while I was standing near him. The full video may be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yUGuMAj2DPU&feature=youtu.be>.

7. On Palang Pracharath's use of money and state resources during the campaign, see Cleve Arguelles et al., *The 2019 Thai General Election: A Missed Opportunity for Democracy* (Bangkok: Asian Network for Free Elections, 2019), esp. 75–78, <https://anfrel.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Thai-Report-2nd-edition.pdf>.

8. "King's Royal Statement Says the Princess Has to Stay Above Politics" [in Thai], *Matichon*, 8 February 2019, www.matichon.co.th/politics/news_1355421.

9. For a relevant picture, see <http://thaipoliticalprisoners.wordpress.com/2019/03/22/cat-among-the-pigeons>.

10. "King Urges Voters to Elect 'Good People,'" *The Nation* (Bangkok), 24 March 2019, www.nationmultimedia.com/detail/national/30366391.

11. Duncan McCargo, "We Are Grown-Up Now and Can Choose for Ourselves," *New York Times*, 29 March 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/03/29/opinion/thailand-election-thanathorn-future-forward-youth-vote.html.

12. For detailed discussions of the election results in each region, see Duncan McCargo, ed., "Roundtable: Thailand's Amazing 24 March 2019 Elections," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 41 (August 2019): 153–222.

13. Nancy Bermeo, "On Democratic Backsliding," *Journal of Democracy* 27 (January 2016): 5–19. Bermeo, however, does not classify the 2014 Thai putsch as a "promissory coup."

14. Prajak Kongkirati, "Haunted Past, Uncertain Future: The Fragile Transition to Military-Guided Semi-Authoritarianism in Thailand," in Daljit Singh and Malcolm Cook, eds., *Southeast Asian Affairs* (2018): 363–76.