

# L'ÉTAT, CE N'EST PLUS MOI

## POPULAR SOVEREIGNTY AND CITIZENSHIP OVER A CENTURY OF THAI POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

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### 1. KING OF THE JUNGLE

Coups d'état work by the law of the jungle, not the law of the land. That is to say, an illegal seizure of power is only truly illegal so long as it is not successful. Decidedly more recent is the notion that a military coup staged in Thailand stands little chance of being successful in the first place, without the endorsement of King Bhumibol Adulyadej. It stands to reason that Army Commander-in-Chief Sonthi Boonyaratglin would be photographed on his knees at Chitrlada Palace, just over an hour after announcing that the military had seized power on the evening of September 19, 2006. After all, by then the generals' every move had been painstakingly choreographed to impress upon the public the idea that the coup had been staged in the King's name, if not on his behalf. Yellow ribbons and flowers adorned tanks, uniforms, and assault rifles. Giant portraits of King and Queen served as the background for major announcements. Royal Commands were read in elaborate ceremonies broadcast on television before garish shrines to Their Majesties. The junta's studiously verbose name, the "Council for Democratic Reform under the King as Head of State," was officially changed more than ten days after the coup, but not before making sure that the people had heard the message loud and clear. Thailand, to be sure, had seen royalist coups before, but none as awash in royal symbolism. Then again, the military had never removed a Prime Minister as popular as Thaksin Shinawatra. As life quickly returned to

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normal, it was evident that royal sanction alone could have muted public opposition to the coup, or staved off the possibility that the deposed Prime Minister might put up any resistance.

As the junta deployed its arsenal of royal symbols to forestall active opposition in the streets, the central role played by King Bhumibol in the legal process that governed the transition effectively thwarted any attempt Thaksin could otherwise have made to challenge the legality of the coup and continue to present himself, internationally, as Thailand's rightful, *de jure* Prime Minister. By any reasonable legal standard, the generals had no authority to abrogate Thailand's 1997 constitution. In turn, in the absence of a constitution specifying the scope his powers, Bhumibol had no real legal standing to endorse the generals' illegal act, grant them immunity from prosecution, or promulgate the interim charter handed down on October 1, 2006. At the same time, Thaksin could not possibly have dared to point out the obvious lack of legal foundations besetting the process. Challenging the legality of his replacement would not only have required Thaksin to argue that the King's signature was inconsequential to the validity of key documents that governed the transition, but also effectively assert that Bhumibol had enabled an illegal (indeed, treasonous) act. That forced Thaksin and his supporters to argue against the *merits* of staging the coup, a subject where the deposed Prime Minister stood on much shakier ground, given that much of what was said about him was actually true.

Quite aside from the strategic import of the monarchy's endorsement, the broad-based acceptance of the legality of the coup, and the measures imposed in its immediate aftermath, reveals a conception of sovereignty quite different from that undergirding any "constitutional monarchy." In Thailand, that is, the monarchy's authority exists quite independently of what the constitution happens to provide. And while most constitutions introduced since 1932 have made some reference to the concept of "popular sovereignty," the fact that the King conserves his authority even after the constitution is abrogated indicates that His Majesty reigns by something more akin to natural right than positive law.<sup>1</sup> Noted royalist Pramuan Ruchanaseri stated as much in a best-selling book published before the coup, where he argued — correctly, as a matter of empirical observation — that "the constitution is not above the King in any way [...] the status of the King does not come under the constitution" (cited in Pasuk and Baker 2009: 255-256). That was certainly not the case in the first quarter century after the removal of the absolute monarchy. Over a week after staging Thailand's last anti-royalist coup, the "Radio Coup" of November 29,

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<sup>1</sup> For an account of how the drafters of the 1997 constitution managed the ambiguity, see Connors (2008: 150-151).

1951, a delegation led by General Phin Choonhavan visited the palace to “inform” Bhumibol that the junta was returning powers that were seized from him when the constitution was abrogated (see *Bangkok Post*, December 7, 1951). By 2006, no military man, much less a Muslim and a polygamist, could presume to “take over” any of the King’s powers, or have the impudence to “inform” him of the junta’s decision to restore his prerogatives. Indeed, whereas the stated intent of the 1932 revolution had been to place the King “under the Constitution,” over his sixty-five year reign Bhumibol has overseen the emergence of a system of government that effectively elevates the King, and his associates, *above* the constitution.

The five years since the 2006 coup have exposed the fatal flaws of Thailand’s “formal democracy with the King above the constitution.” Not only did the coup set in motion a series of events that plunged the country into a situation of great political instability and prolonged civil strife. The actions necessary to the removal of Thaksin and his proxies have given rise to a severe crisis of legitimacy marked by a hitherto unseen measure of resentment for the royal family, complete with expressions of public disgust for the monarchy that would have been unthinkable just five years ago. Indeed, the political crisis that has gripped Thailand for the last five years could be said to be the expression of a cleavage<sup>2</sup> that has variously defined political struggles since the days of the absolute monarchy — the conflict over whether sovereignty, or “constituent power,” rests with the people or the King. This fundamental dispute has important implications for many of the pressing (if often unspoken) normative questions defining Thailand’s present political debate. Do the rights, duties, powers, and decision-making procedures spelled out in the constitution spring from the people or the King? In other words, to the extent that “the people” have rights, do they enjoy such rights as citizens — that is, as full members of the community who are “equal with respect to the rights and duties with which the status is endowed”<sup>3</sup> — or as subjects to whom certain freedoms and legal protections are merely delegated by a higher sovereign power, perhaps in measures commensurate with social status? In turn, should the King — as well as the multiplicity of individuals, organizations, and institutions claiming to speak for, or act in the interest of, the monarchy — be in any way constrained by the constitution, or effectively above it? And do these actors have legitimate authority to undo, through extra-constitutional means, the results of processes conducted in accordance with the constitution?

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<sup>2</sup> Lipset and Rokkan (1967: 10) explain that (functional) cleavages “might be nothing more than direct struggles among competing elites for central power, but they might also reflect deeper differences in conceptions of nationhood, over domestic priorities, and over external strategies.”

<sup>3</sup> This is the classic definition of “citizenship” offered by T.H. Marshall (1964[1949]: 84).

E.E. Schattschneider (1988[1960]) argued that political conflicts tend to be as “contagious” as street fights. Though a particular conflict may start out as a dispute limited to a small number of “active participants,” both the nature and the outcome of the fight change as a larger “audience” joins in. In the specific case, over the past century and a half the conflict between dueling notions of sovereignty and citizenship has spilled over from a highly exclusive circle in the court of King Chulalongkorn to increasingly broad and varied constituencies. The progressive contagion of conflict can largely be attributed to socio-economic change, which made various groups excluded from the original debate increasingly likely to join the fight, often in response to appeals to their desire for political or economic empowerment. What accounts for the uneven, non-linear nature of the contagion is that these constituencies had to be awakened, galvanized, and mobilized by one side or the other before they could themselves turn into “active participants.” Given the multiplicity of cleavages in Thai society, and the internal diversity of all major constituencies, different groups did not always enter the fray as blocks, nor were their allegiances necessarily fixed. At different times, moreover, different sides were variously successful in their attempt to either “privatize” or “socialize” the conflict. For decades, royalists successfully removed the fight over sovereignty from the public arena — while repression discouraged public calls for limitations in royal authority, the state’s propaganda enforced a false sense of unanimity that allowed royalists to prevail without an open confrontation. The conflict’s explosive re-emergence after the 2006 coup was driven by a combination of reasons of both a structural and contingent nature.

Accounts of the political crisis triggered by the 2006 coup are dominated by three narratives, which alternatively describe the ongoing conflict as a fight between democracy and dictatorship, the juxtaposition of two visions of “democracy,” or something of a Hobson’s choice between different forms of authoritarianism.<sup>4</sup> This paper sketches out an integrated approach, examining the historical process by which both the “royalist” and “populist”<sup>5</sup> positions, as well as the prevailing alignments on both sides of the fight, have developed over the past century, drawing on Schattschneider’s logic to accommodate the multiplicity of motivations animating the major players and constituencies involved. At the elite level, naked power is treated as a far stronger motive, for royalists and Thaksinites alike, than the ideals in which both sides couch their appeals

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<sup>4</sup> For a rich sampling, see Montesano, Pavin, and Aekapol (2011). Thongchai (2008) also demolishes a fourth narrative of Thailand’s political crisis, which describes the 2006 coup as a coup *for* democracy.

<sup>5</sup> The word “populist” is used in this context only as a label for supporters of popular sovereignty, without any implication for their economic platform or their rhetorical style.

for popular support. In particular, the propensity of key players to change their positions, switch sides, and at different times choose to either “privatize” or “socialize” the conflict is evidence of the fact that elites seek to define the terms of the fight based on interest, strategic calculus, and situational factors more than any values or ideals. At the same time, as Schattschneider (1988[1960]: 4) pointed out, each sizable increase in the number of participants must be “about something,” beyond simple elite interest, as “newcomers have sympathies and antipathies that make it possible to involve them.” While stipulating Thaksin’s insincerity, and his pronounced authoritarian tendencies, this approach recognizes that the reasons for his removal were others, and interprets the backlash against the repeated subversion of the electoral process as both visceral and principled, not just “patronage-based.”<sup>6</sup>

## 2. FAIT (IN)ACCOMPLI

Thailand’s (then Siam) absolute monarchy came to an end with a pre-dawn coup d’état staged on June 24, 1932 by a group of mostly young, foreign-educated military officers and civil servants. Upon seizing power, the Promoters mapped out a ten-year transition to full representative democracy. The 1932 coup, however, had been less about “democracy” than it had been about “constitutionalism,”<sup>7</sup> the ambition to limit royal authority and place the King under a constitution. The six principles spelled out in the “First Announcement of the People’s Party” included “freedom” (เสรีภาพ) and “individual autonomy” (ความเป็นอิสระ) as well as the provision of “equal rights” (สิทธิเสมอภาคกัน), such that “the royal class does not have more rights than the people” (ไม่ใช่พวกเจ้ามีสิทธิยิ่งกว่าราษฎร). Crucially, the Promoters declared that “the country belongs to the people, not to the King, as he has fraudulently claimed” (ประเทศเรานี้เป็นของราษฎรไม่ใช่ของกษัตริย์ตามที่เขาหลอกหลวง). The temporary constitution promulgated within a week of the coup vested “supreme power” in “the people” (Art. 1) and specified that the King, together with the legislature, the executive, and the courts, would “exercise power on behalf of the people” (Art. 2).

The conflict between dueling notions of sovereignty and citizenship had emerged in the early period of “National Revolution”<sup>8</sup> set in motion in Siam by the sweeping bureaucratic reforms

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<sup>6</sup> For an account presenting the crisis as a “conflict between different elements of the Thai elite, who have mobilized rival patronage-based networks of supporters,” see McCargo (2009: 9).

<sup>7</sup> See Elster (1993) for greater insight into this distinction.

<sup>8</sup> National Revolutions entail the “growth of national bureaucracies,” the “widening of the scope of governmental activities,” as well as an effort by the state to foster the emergence of a single

enacted by King Chulalongkorn in the late nineteenth century. The debate over limitations to monarchical power is customarily traced back to 1885, when eleven members of the Siamese royal elite studying abroad wrote to Chulalongkorn, advising him to initiate a gradual transition in the direction of constitutional monarchy. By the time the question was put directly to the King, the conflict had already been spreading through the ranks of the greatly expanded civilian/military bureaucracy, especially the new “bureaucratic bourgeoisie” recruited from among commoners who had received a Western or “Western-style” education. Their grievances were a mixture of private motives and philosophical positions. On the one hand, the coexistence of a salaried, modern bureaucracy with a system of patronage designed to preserve the privilege of the old nobility stifled opportunities for career advancement for those whose lineage lagged behind their educational achievement. On the other hand, the exposure that these officials had received to Western liberal ideas provided ideological content to their discontent over arbitrary royal power and privilege, fostering a growing identification with an idea of “the nation” dissociated from the person of the King (see Kullada 2004).

Having only recently succeeded in wresting power away from more conservative princes within his own court, Chulalongkorn had initially responded to the request put to him in 1885 by arguing that limitations to his authority would have actually compromised the implementation of reforms necessary to protect Siam’s independence. In the ensuing years, however, the King moved from reasoning exclusively on grounds of expediency to sketching out a more ideological defense of his personal power aimed at cementing the loyalty of the bureaucracy. In a series of speeches, Chulalongkorn elaborated on his opposition to liberal reforms by emphasizing (and vastly overstating) the differences between European and Siamese conceptions of kingship, thereby asserting the incompatibility of “Western political institutions” with local traditions (see Murashima 1988: 84-89). His son and successor, King Vajiravudh (r. 1910-1925), fleshed out this argument in defense of royal absolutism more fully, crafting a theory of “official nationalism” that stressed the identification of “nation” and “king.” Among other things, Vajiravudh’s vision of Thai society entailed a by now familiar distinction between *phu yai*, “big men” tasked with the

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national identity through cultural, linguistic, and sometimes religious standardization (see Lipset and Rokkan 1967: 13). Among other things, the process tends to generate oppositions between different groups of “nation-builders” over the organization of the state, particularly over issues of popular sovereignty, rights, secularism, constitutionalism, and democracy. In nineteenth-century Western Europe, the process ushered in the development of representative institutions and the extension of the franchise, among other civil and political rights. For an earlier application to Siam/Thailand, see Ockey (2005).

responsibility to rule, and *phu noi*, “little people” whose service to the nation was to be measured in terms of their submission and compliance (see Barmé 1993: 31).

While King Vajiravudh’s ideas proved quite influential, in the long run, to the development of Thai nationalist ideology, in the short-to-medium term they had little effect on shoring up the loyalty of the country’s officialdom. In fact, Vajiravudh’s reign was distinguished by the further contagion of conflict. This took place as a result of the diffusion of ideas of progress and individual equality as well as contingent factors, particularly the growing dissatisfaction with Vajiravudh’s profligacy and the self-indulgence of prominent members of the royal family. By the end of the Sixth Reign, the boom of popular newspapers catering to a bourgeois and upper-middle class readership led to the popularization of verbal and visual content that routinely portrayed royals and noblemen as a corrupt, debauched, parasitic elite (see Barmé 2002: Ch. 4). When Vajiravudh was succeeded by his brother, Prajadhipok, in 1925, threats to the monarchy’s continued existence figured prominently in the new King’s willingness to consider promulgating a constitution. Ultimately, the failure to enact one reflected unresolved doubts in Prajadhipok’s court over whether the delegation in some of his powers, instead of defusing the potential for the monarchy to succumb to a rebellion, could have in fact accelerated the conflict’s contagion by raising further questions about the King’s strength, competence, and commitment.<sup>9</sup>

Much like Western Europe, where the competition between liberals and conservatives dominated the political scene throughout the period of National Revolution, the main political cleavage in the aftermath of Siam’s 1932 coup placed liberal-radical proponents of popular sovereignty, constitutionalism, and gradual democratic reforms against conservative-royalist elements aspiring to restore royal authority. In Western Europe, however, liberals and conservatives were given a chance to fight out their differences in the electoral arena, such that by the time universal (male) suffrage was granted (mostly in the aftermath of World War I), conservative parties had given up on advocating for a return to the *ancien régime* (see Caramani 2004: 199-204). Things turned out quite differently in Siam, where the conflict was never resolved in the liberals’ favor, giving royalists a chance to qualify and ultimately subvert the principle of popular sovereignty.

The divergence in the outcomes produced by National Revolutions in Western Europe and Siam can be explained largely by differences in the sequence and timing of the process. Perhaps most

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<sup>9</sup> For an overview of the debates on constitutionalism in Prajadhipok’s court, see Ferrara (2012).

important, whereas the Western European struggle for civil and political rights in the nineteenth century intersected with the Industrial Revolution, which triggered a progressive “massification” of politics, Siam’s National Revolution took place well before the emergence of any working class movement, or for that matter any form of mass mobilization. The coup staged on June 24, 1932 was broadly welcomed by Bangkok’s small upper-middle class, but much of the rest of the country reacted with indifference to the events in the capital. While the absence of popular involvement, in support or opposition to the coup, may have helped ensure the smoothness of the operation, the masses’ indifference and backwardness discouraged the Promoters from attempting to broaden their fight against the royalist establishment.<sup>10</sup> The timing of the coup, moreover, aided the royalists’ initial counterrevolutionary effort. At a time when governments in many countries in Europe and elsewhere faced a revolutionary challenge by communist parties, Siamese royalists exploited the specter of communism to undermine the public’s trust in the new government and drive a wedge between more conservative and radical factions of the People’s Party (see Nattapoll 2010). The counterrevolution eventually failed to dislodge the Promoters, or restore any of the King’s old prerogatives. But the resulting instability, and the authoritarian measures taken in response, created an opening for the subsequent reassertion of the monarchy’s status and power.

Months before his abdication, King Prajadhipok issued a stern warning to the government of Phya Phahon Phonphayahasena. “There are those who still believe in the absolute monarchy because of its long history,” he wrote, “but nobody will stand for the absolute rule of the *khana*.”<sup>11</sup> In fact, the People’s Party never came close to exercising “absolute rule.” But the King had nonetheless correctly identified the regime’s Achilles’ heel in its tendency to confer upon those in power the role of sole protectors of the constitution and only true representatives of “the people.” Still in office but shaken by the failed counterrevolution and less than confident in their own pull with the electorate, the Promoters opted to manage the conflict instead of broadening it, and chose to control civil society rather than take a chance on its mobilization. In the years comprised between Prajadhipok’s abdication in 1935 and the onset of World War II, Colonel (and then Field Marshal)

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<sup>10</sup> The fact that the country’s tiny industrial/commercial bourgeoisie was dominated by ethnic Chinese, who also accounted for at least half of Bangkok’s small urban working class, served to further caution the Promoters against the prospect of mobilizing these constituencies. For a discussion of the “dilemma” faced by the Promoters in this regard, see Skinner (1957: 219).

<sup>11</sup> These words appear in a Royal Note (พระราชบัญญัติ) transmitted to the government in December 1934 (see *Official Report on the Abdication of King Prajadhipok* 1935: 105).

Phibun Songkhram presided over the country's slide into military dictatorship, as well as the development of a virulent form of nationalism that emphasized social conformity and "state identity" over constitutionalism (see Chai-anan 2002: 58).

The People's Party's departure from ideals of constitutionalism and democracy aggravated the internal rifts and deficit of legitimacy that royalists successfully exploited to regain their ascendancy in the 1940s and 1950s. Indeed, whereas the conflict between Promoters and royalists had once juxtaposed competing notions of "sovereignty" (popular v. royal), Thailand's reversal into authoritarianism gave rise to new, unstable alignments. After Phibun's ouster in 1944, the coalition formed during World War II between civilian Promoter Pridi Banomyong and key royalists who joined the anti-Japanese movement Seri Thai fractured. Pridi's supporters and royalists organized in different political parties, which fought bitterly for political power. The competition, however, was not limited to the electoral/legislative process. Outnumbered in parliament, royalists such as the brothers Kukrit and Seni Pramroj took the opportunity to accuse Pridi of King Ananda Mahidol's mysterious death in 1946, forcing the government's resignation. Then, aristocrats and Democrat Party politicians collaborated with the resurgent Phibun, who staged a coup in 1947 and allowed the promulgation of a new constitution complete with greatly expanded royal prerogatives (see Kobkua 2003: 50-54). The ensuing royalist power-grab was put to an end with the 1951 "Radio Coup," by which the military introduced an amended version of the 1932 constitution, stripping the monarchy of the powers it had recently regained.

At that point Phibun was presented with two major threats to his power. The first threat was posed by royalists (including princes, senior civil servants, and Democrat Party politicians) who, despite diminished numbers in parliament and the reduced role of the monarchy, had benefited from their postwar re-organization as well as the campaign carried out between 1946 and 1951 to bolster the popularity of young King Bhumibol. The second threat was posed by the other members of Phibun's new governing triumvirate, Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat and Police Director-General Phao Sriyanond. To counter both threats, Phibun made a strategic decision to "socialize" his power struggles. He responded to Bhumibol's growing appeal with efforts to elevate his own standing through acts of conspicuous "generosity," aggressive promotion of Buddhism, and appropriation of some historical symbolism with which he sought to portray himself as the "father of the nation" (see Handley 2006: 126-130). In an attempt to extricate himself from Phao and Sarit, moreover, Phibun introduced a skeletal Political Parties Act in 1955 and unexpectedly liberalized political speech and press freedom upon his return from a trip to the United States and

the United Kingdom in June 1955. Contemporaneous accounts suggest that Phibun was impressed with the degree of independence that leaders like Winston Churchill and Dwight Eisenhower exercised thanks to their electoral popularity (see Wilson and Phillips 1958). It was also reported at the time that Phibun enjoyed the spectacle of cabinet ministers getting “debugged” by the press, and hoped to benefit from the media’s interest in the police’s (i.e., Phao’s) many illegal dealings (see Pickerell and Moore 1957).

Phibun’s gambit failed spectacularly. On the one hand, the long-serving Prime Minister had underestimated the educated public’s dissatisfaction with the government, as well as Sarit’s growing popularity “with the press, the students, the disenchanting public, and certain politicians” (Thak 2007[1979]: 73). On the other hand, Phao’s diminished credibility deprived Phibun of an effective ally with whom to counter Sarit’s rise. With the support of the palace, Sarit exploited the discontent with Phibun’s fraudulent victory in the February 1957 elections by further undermining the government in parliament as well as with public opinion in Bangkok. When Sarit finally seized power in September 1957, forcing Phibun and Phao to leave the country for good, King Bhumibol offered his support, giving the coup immediate legal sanction and publicly praising its intentions.

Sarit did not show much of a taste for the more liberal climate fostered by Phibun’s reforms, which had help propel his rise, and rapidly implemented measures designed to prevent any further contagion of conflict. Deeply dissatisfied over the fact that “there still existed a parliament, political parties, a free press system that could criticize the government,” and “labor unions that could go on strike whenever they were unhappy with their employers” (see Thak 2007[1979]: 95), Sarit staged another coup on September 18, 1958. Political rights like freedom of speech and association were rescinded under Sarit’s iron-fisted dictatorship. The recurrent election of legislative representatives was scrapped altogether. Civil liberties like those that guaranteed criminal defendants a measure of due process were supplanted by illiberal provisions like Article 17 of the 1959 constitution, which allowed the Prime Minister to order the execution without trial of anyone he deemed a threat to national security. The egalitarian ideals formerly championed by some People’s Party officials were superseded by the government’s unabashed attempt to perpetuate existing inequalities. The country’s most powerful domestic capitalists were nurtured by the state and protected from competition; entire sectors of Thailand’s economy were sold off to foreign and domestic oligopolists in exchange for billions, paid on the condition that the generals make life difficult for smaller, local competitors and repress any labor movement that

might seek better pay and work conditions for Thai workers (see Akira 1996: 179-180). Meanwhile, the military government insisted that the rural population should remain forever content to eke out a simple existence upcountry — the refusal of many to embrace their station in life portending the “deterioration” of Thai society (see Thak 2007[1979]: 105-106, 122).

Most importantly, perhaps, as Sarit sought to establish the absolute rule of his own *khana*, he saw in the restoration of the monarchy’s mystique, prestige, and power a source of legitimacy more potent than the pretense of constitutionalism and elections — one that would afford him, and many of his successors, the opportunity to dress up harsh dictatorial measures in a benign, paternalistic attire. With the enthusiastic backing of the United States government, Sarit began the process of exalting and deifying the monarchy, while his ideologues conceived a model of governance (“Thai-Style Democracy”) that could be described as a form of “Platonic guardianship with Theravada characteristics.”<sup>12</sup> The multi-talented “philosopher-king” sat atop a hierarchy of supposedly “natural” inequalities of wealth, power, and status — legitimized, in place of Plato’s “noble lie,” by Buddhist superstitions of karma, merit, and charismatic authority (บารมี). The King’s military “auxiliaries,” meanwhile, were put in charge of running the country and effectively elevated above the law. What was demanded of “the people,” once again equated with “children,” not citizens, was mere reverence and obedience.

### 3. A FEW GOOD MEN

The palace-military alliance forged under Sarit reconciled two institutions that had been mostly at loggerheads over the previous quarter century. At least initially, the new alliance did not find it especially difficult to consolidate power and manage conflict. Part of this had to do with the weakness of the opposition, deprived of many of its leading personalities. Pridi and Phibun were gone for good. Many other proponents of democracy and constitutionalism, including a number of leftist politicians from the Northeast, were exiled, arrested, or executed (see Keyes 1967: 50-54). With the defeat of the democratic opposition, some remaining dissidents gravitated towards the Communist Party of Thailand. But though the communist insurgency never seriously threatened to topple the government in Bangkok, the *threat* of communism trumped up by the military and the palace in the 1960s and 1970s repeatedly served as the excuse to proscribe and often violently suppress dissent.

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<sup>12</sup> The concept of “guardianship” is contrasted with “democracy” in Dahl (1991: 52-64).

By then, moreover, most of the country's population was not appreciably more involved or politicized than it had been at the time of the 1932 coup. Writing on the heels of Sarit's conservative "revolution," Wilson (1962: 57-58) noted "a clear distinction," based primarily on the level of education, "between those who are involved in politics and those who are not." Those who were involved, the educated classes in the capital city, were said to pose no threat to the status quo, given their vested interest in the preservation of "traditional notions of social hierarchy." As for the peasantry, estimated as "more than eighty percent of the population," Wilson described the fundamental importance of "its inarticulate acquiescence to the central government and indifference to national politics" to the stability of the country's social and political structure.<sup>13</sup> While much of the country had experienced significant economic change since the signing of the Bowring Treaty of 1855, the increased economic insecurity produced by the commercialization of the agricultural sector and explosive population growth had not been accompanied by the emergence of a strong political consciousness, perhaps primarily because economic change had failed to trigger much in the way of actual development or modernization.<sup>14</sup>

As noted, one of the reasons why the end of the absolute monarchy did not settle the issue of popular sovereignty is that Thailand's National Revolution did not intersect, as it did in Western Europe, with the "massification" of politics set in motion by the Industrial Revolution. An economic transformation of comparable import did take place in Thailand beginning in the late 1950s. Once again, however, the decoupling of Thailand's National and Industrial Revolutions, and the occurrence of the latter at a time when the power of the monarchy and the military was deeply entrenched, accounts for the contradictory effects exerted by the subsequent political awakening of new constituencies.

The economic transformation that took place in the 1960s undermined the structural foundations of Thailand's military regime. The boom, which was accompanied by the dramatic growth in the

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<sup>13</sup> More controversially, Wilson (1962: 57-58) attributed the peasantry's "political inaction" to "a tolerable economic situation which provides a stable subsistence without encouraging any great hope for quick improvement." Others have pointed out that the rural population was not quite as free of political and economic grievances as Wilson suggested, given "significant and longstanding poverty, stratification, and rural indebtedness" (Bowie 1997: 61).

<sup>14</sup> For an argument about the failure of economic change to bring about development between 1850 and 1950, see Ingram (1971: 216-217). Part of the reason is that the expansion in economic activity had largely followed an exploitative, quasi-colonial model founded on the extraction of wealth from the countryside and its reinvestment in Bangkok (see Chatthip 1999: 51-59).

service economy and vast increases in the secondary and tertiary student populations, multiplied the size of the petty middle class and the urban bourgeoisie several times over. At the same time, increased landlordism in the provinces push young men to join the ranks of the working class and the underemployed in Bangkok. These developments not only rearranged Thailand's social structure, giving rise to new classes whose aspirations were not matched by the limited political role reserved for them under military rule, but also generated new rivalries, resentments, and fears. The potential for upheaval increased as the bureaucracy approached saturation, foreclosing traditional routes to social advancement for millions of new graduates, and especially when the economy slowed as a result of American disengagement (see Anderson 1977: 15-18). Thailand's military rulers made things worse by calling new elections in 1969, over a decade since the doors of parliament had last been shuttered, only to then dissolve the National Assembly and repeal the new constitution in a "self-coup" staged in 1971.

In retrospect, it is somewhat ironic that the power and prestige of the monarchy reached its zenith as Thailand entered the era of mass politics — just as more and more people entered the system and demanded "democracy," the issue of popular sovereignty was effectively muted. Part of the reason is that by the time Thailand experienced mass participation in the early 1970s, the palace had benefited from a fifteen-year head start in promoting its image through modern means of mass communication. For most mainstream political actors, the mere appearance of a "universally revered" monarch was strong enough incentive to frame political demands in a manner that did not challenge the palace or its extra-constitutional prerogatives. Failing that, Thailand's *lèse majesté* laws effectively restricted the range of political contestation by punishing, harshly, the few inclined to test the true limits and depths of the King's enforced popularity. It is thus that the 1930s-era fight to place the King *under* the constitution had morphed, by the 1970s, into mere demands for *a* constitution, and that the struggle for democracy waged by increasingly sizable constituencies between 1973 and 1992 never resulted in the mainstreaming of more radical critiques of the monarchy's role and constitutional status. Most of the movements and organizations that came onto the scene during that time saw it fit not to challenge the role of the King as sovereign, but rather chose to frame appeals for democracy in royal symbolism. Whenever the palace felt that its image was threatened by events on the streets, moreover, Bhumibol's public and carefully stage-managed interventions served to "privatize," manage, or steer the course of conflict in less menacing directions. The King's interventions in 1973 and 1992, in turn, further elevated the status of the monarchy, providing some cover for the palace's complicity in the mob violence of the mid-1970s as well as military coups in 1976 and 1991.

The palace's success, however, was also in part a function of its willingness to adapt, learn from its mistakes, and eventually allow the country to democratize, at least insofar as the process did not encroach on its reserve domains. While the 1973 protests definitively brought the era of outright military dictatorship to a close, the palace played a major role in the effort to contain the rapid contagion of conflict that characterized the ill-fated period of "real" democracy comprised between 1973 and 1976 (see Morell and Chai-anan 1981). The nationalist hysteria and fears of communist takeover hyped by the military and the palace during that time intensified the social hostilities that had emerged as a result of the economic transformation the country had recently experienced, securing the support of the disaffected, the insecure petty bourgeoisie, and traditionalist elites who felt threatened by the mobilization of students, workers, and peasants for the drastic measures taken in 1976 (see Anderson 1977: 24). After a brief period of extreme repression following the 1976 massacre at Thammasat University, the palace remained determined to preserve its dominance over Thailand's political system, and to secure the rural populace's continued acceptance of a subaltern status by placing renewed emphasis on the familial unity between the peasantry and the monarchy (see Streckfuss 2010: 213-215).<sup>15</sup> The premiership of General Prem Tinsulanonda (1980-1988), however, was also marked by the development of functioning representative institutions, and the increased salience of electoral participation and competition. Thailand was allowed to transition from a version of "pseudo-democracy" to "electoral democracy" upon Prem's retirement in 1988, and again after the state violence of "Black May" 1992.

The ouster of General Suchinda Kraprayoon in 1992 resulted from a botched attempt made by military and the palace to restore Thailand to the days of "Premocracy," to turn the clock back to a time when an unelected military man could run the country, legitimized by the existence of a functioning parliament but not meaningfully encumbered by any changes elections might bring to its composition. The failure of Suchinda's restoration gave way to a new adaptation. The military was effectively sidelined, the Thai people's wish to elect their own governments begrudgingly granted. Still, as a result of the King's intervention, the palace preserved much of its

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<sup>15</sup> Perhaps more than the mobilization of students and workers, most troubling for conservatives had been the demonstrations staged by peasant groups throughout the country to demand the enforcement of rent controls and legal protections from exploitation (see Haberkorn 2011, Ch. 2). The cultivation of Bhumibol's image as a benevolent father, wholly dedicated to improving the lives of his "children," was essential to the legitimacy of the social hierarchy over which he presided, given the inequality and exploitation the system engendered.

influence and standing. The network of “good men” Prem had built in most state institutions was leveraged throughout the 1990s to shape national policy, as well as manipulate or actively undermine elected governments notorious for their weakness and fragmentation (see McCargo 2005: 507-515). At the same time, the palace’s efforts to discredit elected politicians and prevent the aggregation of political forces capable of challenging its extra-constitutional authority softened the public’s confidence in democratic institutions, weakened elected governments, and favored a style of politics founded on patronage and corruption. This allowed the palace to conserve the moral high ground, protect the legitimacy of its routine interferences, and maintain its role as the “ultimate arbiter of political decisions in times of crisis” (McCargo 2005: 501).

Though the fight over the monarchy’s role was effectively “organized out of politics” as Bhumibol reached the apogee of his power and popularity, the prevalence of ideas of popular sovereignty around the world made it almost inevitable that the question would be revisited at some point as the King exited the scene. But it was a constellation of factors of both a structural and contingent character, and the confluence of historical processes of both a long- and short-term nature, that accounts for the rapid and explosive re-emergence of the unresolved fight over sovereignty and equal citizenship in the wake of the 2006 coup. Perhaps the most profound reason for the system’s inherent instability — beyond the diffusion of new technologies that make it more difficult to control the flow of information without resorting to conspicuous repressive measures — is the fundamental transformation that Thailand’s social structure has undergone since the late 1970s.

The socio-economic transformations in question transcend the numerical growth of the urban middle class, which had formed the basis for mass demonstrations in 1973 and 1992. At the top level, continued economic growth spurred the rise of new business elites far less connected with, and hence less invested in, the palace’s networks of power in the military and the civil service (see Anek 1992). This class did not exhibit any particular ideological aversion to the old order. Nonetheless, the capital available to this new business elite created conditions for the emergence of networks of power alternative to those commanded by the palace.<sup>16</sup> Possibly more momentous was the transformation that had taken place at the bottom of Thailand’s social hierarchy, undermining its foundations. On the one hand, development and modernization transformed rural livelihoods, giving rise to a more educated, more worldly, more consumption-minded mass

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<sup>16</sup> For how this new network subsequently coalesced around Thaksin Shinawatra, see McCargo and Ukrist (2005: Ch. 6).

of “middle income peasants” (see Walker 2010a) — an increasingly large percentage no longer involved in agriculture at all — less likely to exhibit the “inarticulate acquiescence” and “indifference to national politics” that were once identified as essential to the stability of the old order (see Wilson 1962: 57-58). On the other hand, the persistence of extreme levels of inequality<sup>17</sup> rendered this vast segment of the population decidedly more receptive to a discourse of empowerment. Though neither political consciousness nor economic grievances automatically translate into political mobilization, the “struggles for the right to have rights” (see Somchai 2006; see also Missingham 2004) waged by groups representing farmers and workers in the 1980s and 1990s offered glimpses of the *potential* held by the mobilization of the provincial masses, now far more inclined to regard themselves as “citizens” than “children.”

The royalist camp made things worse in at least two ways. First, beginning in the early 1990s, King Bhumibol began to speak in terms that evidenced the palace’s failure to accept the implications of the country’s socio-economic transformation. Bhumibol’s rejection of “progress,” his pleas to “walk backwards into a *khlong*,” his insistent portrayal of the desire for self-advancement as “greed,” and eventually his “new theory” centered on economic “sufficiency” (see Walker 2010b) offered a vision of the future fundamentally at odds with the aspirations of upward mobility increasingly harbored by much of the population. That generated no resentment in and of itself, given the King’s fatherly image and well-intentioned presentation, but placed the palace at a risk of fading rapidly into irrelevance, should someone ever come along with an alternative, potentially more empowering vision. Second, in the absence of an imminent, majoritarian threat to the status quo, “royal liberals” (see Connors 2008) close to the palace felt comfortable enough to spearhead the effort that culminated in the promulgation of a constitution, in 1997, that was not only more “liberal” than its forerunners, but also more protective of the stability of the executive against the vagaries of Thailand’s fragmented legislature. This, in turn, constituted something of a unilateral disarmament on the part of the royalist establishment. Should a government ever develop the electoral popularity and ambition to challenge the palace’s networks of power, the new rules of the game limited the ability of unelected institutions to deter, undermine, or eject it through means other than brute military force.

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<sup>17</sup> For a concise explanation of why Thailand’s growth required extreme levels of inequality, see Montesano (2010: 279).

## 4. THE WHORE OF BABYLON

There is considerable merit to the argument that Thaksin Shinawatra had sought to establish an “elected dictatorship” during his five years in office. While Thaksin proved singularly capable of reducing the fragmentation of Thailand’s political system, that is, the unprecedented concentration of powers in the hands of an elected, civilian leader also allowed his administration to pursue policies that eroded several aspects of the country’s electoral democracy. The rule of law was weakened by corruption and, especially, by the wave of state violence unleashed in the context of the (palace-inspired) “War on Drugs” in 2003 and the (palace-instigated) response to the southern insurgency beginning in 2004. Government accountability was undermined by the attempt made to vanquish independent state agencies. And freedom of the press declined sharply as a result of legal measures taken against critics of the administration as well as informal pressures placed on the print and broadcast media to provide favorable coverage. After the 2005 elections, where Thaksin’s party Thai Rak Thai took three quarters of the lower house seats, Thailand seemed well on its way to developing a form of “democracy” with a much stronger “delegative” (see O’Donnell 1994: 59) than “representative” or “liberal” flavor.

Far more determinative of his eventual removal is the fact that Thaksin’s electoral popularity placed him in a position to mount a historic assault on the reserve domains of unelected institutions such as the palace, the military, and the bureaucracy (see Thitinan 2008). And, unlike most of his predecessors, Thaksin had ambition and hubris in large enough supplies to actually take them on, if only to maximize his own standing and power. Aside from the troubling possibility that Thaksin might be in office in the event of royal succession, what appears to have most threatened the palace was the prospect that the popularity Thaksin enjoyed in the provinces might have begun to overshadow the King’s. Such fears were rendered particularly acute by the recognition that Thaksin’s vision of “capitalist revolution” were not only proving far more in step with the provincial electorate’s aspirations than Bhumibol’s own retrograde ideas, but also that the ambitions of upward mobility that even the poorest Thais were now encouraged to embrace threatened to scramble the social hierarchies upon which “Thai-Style Democracy” had once been founded.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, whereas critics often justify their distaste for Thaksin on the grounds that his support is bought and paid for, Thaksin’s popularity with provincial voters and the urban working class had never been primarily about the material benefits he was able to provide. By and large, Thaksin remains popular with these constituencies for reasons of a more psychological or

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<sup>18</sup> For a more detailed discussion, see Hewison and Kengkij (2010: 194-196).

emotional nature — in Thaksin, these voters found a national leader who did not tell them it was their patriotic duty to accept their station in life, but encouraged them to imagine a different future for themselves and their families. In essence that is what made Thaksin dangerous, the capacity he had demonstrated to involve in his largely private struggle for political power a whole new mass of “active participants.”<sup>19</sup>

Given Thaksin’s strength and staying power, the only card his enemies had left to play was military force, backed by the monarchy’s prestige. The task, however, was far more complex than simply removing a Prime Minister. Indeed, the complexity of the task, and the determination with which Thaksin fought back, transformed the attempt to stamp out his influence into something of a bottomless pit, down which the monarchy ended up flushing almost the entirety of the considerable political capital it had accumulated over decades. While the junta lay the groundwork for Thaksin’s prosecution, confiscated his assets, dissolved Thai Rak Thai, and dismantled the constitutional provisions that protected his dominance, all that did not prevent the Thaksin-backed People Power Party from winning a large plurality in the 2007 elections. Nor did the desperate measures launched in 2008 by the People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD), the military, and the judiciary accomplish much more than further compromise the stability of the country and the legitimacy of the royalist establishment. Abhisit Vejjajiva was made Prime Minister in December 2008, on the strength of a motley legislative coalition patched together with the assistance of the military and the palace, if only to suffer a crushing defeat at the hands of Thaksin’s youngest sister Yingluck in the 2011 elections. The intervening thirty months rank among the most tumultuous in Bhumibol’s entire reign.

In response to a series of protests staged against his administration in late 2005, Thaksin boasted that he was immune to the recurrence of a historical pattern that had seen governments elected by the countryside removed by (or with the support of) Bangkok, as he had the backing of both. Based on the results of the 2005 elections, that assessment was largely accurate. Thai Rak Thai dominated not only the North and Northeast of the country, but also the more prosperous

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<sup>19</sup> The irony is that Thaksin himself may not have initially realized the historical import of what he was doing. After all, while his policies may have been designed in part to earn the support provincial voters and the urban poor, the largest beneficiaries had been large corporations, particularly those in his own network (see McCargo and Ukrist 2005: 218). By the end of his first term, however, Thaksin had clearly realized the potential trump card he held, and sought to rebrand himself as something of a plebeian tribune (see Pasuk and Baker 2009: 232-233).

Central region as well as much of Bangkok. That had changed somewhat by the time of the coup, to which Bangkok residents exhibited little overt opposition, and especially in the 2007 elections, where the People Power Party lost considerable ground to the Democrats in the capital. In the intervening time, it seems, royalists had managed to dent Thaksin's support among urban middle class voters. Taking a page out of the royalist playbook from the mid-1970s, the PAD was particularly effective, at least initially, in its attempt to arouse the insecurities and fears of urban middle class voters, warning that Thaksin's populism would come largely at the expense of *their* economic well being and social status (see Pasuk and Baker 2009: 253, 264-266). The PAD, moreover, was joined by military generals, royalist academics, Democrat Party politicians, and parts of the national press in appealing to the sense of moral superiority of middle-class voters, playing up crude cultural stereotypes such as the notion that the provincial electorate's ignorance, credulousness, and moral corruption required the derogation of majority rule, and the placement of the majority of the population under the tutelage of the usual set of "good men." According to royalist rationalizations of the coup, the problem was not just Thaksin, but those who elected him.

This rhetorical strategy may have earned the urban middle class' support for, or acquiescence to, the 2006 coup and the removal of two People Power Party governments in 2008. But the invalidation of such clear electoral choices, and its justification in terms so offensive, elitist, and occasionally dehumanizing, had the effect of radicalizing a sizable portion of Thaksin's supporters among provincial voters and the urban working class, making many of them receptive to arguments denouncing the fundamental injustice of Thailand's traditional hierarchies of status and power. This, in turn, facilitated Thaksin's effort to "socialize" the conflict by linking the grievances of his constituents to his own, as well as by fostering among his diverse supporters something of a common *identity* as second-class citizens. The host of illiberal measures taken by the royalist establishment to obliterate Thaksin's influence, moreover, not only marked a radical departure from "royal liberalism," exposing a decidedly less benevolent side to the royalist hierarchical worldview, but also revealed the hypocrisy of much of the criticism that had been leveled against Thaksin's own administration.

This is the basis of resentment and frustration that accounts for the rapid growth of the "Red Shirt" movement in the months following Abhisit's rise to Prime Minister. There can be little doubt that the establishment of the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) reflected an attempt by Thaksin and his allies to "socialize" their struggle for power by involving

constituencies that could tip the balance in their favor. Thaksin's call for a "people's revolution" during the Red Shirts' failed uprising in April 2009 contrasts starkly with his "pluto-populist" governing philosophy — as one commentator put it early in his first term, "the plutocrats make big money, and the people don't make big trouble" (Chang Noi 2002). For "the people" to now make "big trouble," however, Thaksin had to make the fight about more than himself. And, on this count, recent Thai history offered a rich repertoire of issues and symbols that fit the circumstances and mood of his supporters. It was thus that the 1930s-era fight for equal citizenship and popular sovereignty was unearthed, albeit now married to political vision that emphasizes "electoralism" over "constitutionalism." On the one hand, UDD leaders spoke to the issue of citizenship by appealing to their supporters' desire to be recognized as fully "Thai" — to be considered full members of the community, irrespective of wealth, status, or karmic stock, and to be treated as equal under the law without "double standards." On the other hand, by training its sights on the *amartaya* — the King's mandarins and praetorian guards — for the first time in decades the UDD combined a campaign for "democracy" with the demand that no unelected institution, no matter how close its affiliation with the palace, should have the authority to overturn the electorate's decisions, or interfere with the activities of an elected government.

As the Red Shirts stepped up their activities and mobilization, it is not altogether surprising, given the issues at stake, that the fight was increasingly presented through imagery harkening back to the days of the absolute monarchy. Dismissed by pundits as anachronistic, the adoption of the word *phrai* (ไพร่) as an identifier served to both redefine the nature of the fight and bring into sharper focus just how radical a challenge the Red Shirts had grown to present, by 2010, to Thailand's entrenched structure of power. Up until 1905, the designation *phrai* referred to lowest commoners in Siam's feudal hierarchy (*sakdina*) — freemen subject to corvée in the service of the King, the army, or an individual landlord. The embracement of their identity as modern-day *phrai* reflected not only the Red Shirts' newfound sense of pride in their status as commoners, but perhaps most ominously their rejection of an entire social order founded upon supposedly "natural" hierarchies of status and merit. Taking pride in low social status, in particular, highlighted the fact that many among them no longer accepted the myth that high status means "goodness" and "goodness" legitimizes privileged access to political power.

Thaksinites and Red Shirts have been frequently accused of the harboring ambitions to overthrow the monarchy. Far greater damage to the long-term viability of the monarchy, however, has been done by the continued exploitation of the need to protect the institution to justify every form of

prevarication and abuse that supposed “royalists” have carried out since the coup. The conspicuous use of royal symbolism may have helped the generals outmaneuver Thaksin on the night of September 19, 2006. But Thaksin’s comeback forced his enemies to fall back on the need to protect the monarchy so often, and to justify measures so distasteful, as to not only diminish the power of the argument, but also effectively devalue the institution itself. The airport occupations, the censorship of the internet, the arrests for *lèse majesté*, the recourse to emergency powers, and even the killings of Red Shirt protesters in April-May 2010 were all justified on the basis of defending the King from a tenebrous conspiracy. And while Thaksin, as most Red Shirt leaders, have continued to publicly profess their loyalty, the royalist establishment’s constant misuse of the monarchy’s supposed endangerment invited a measure of scrutiny, by the international media and ordinary citizens, which effectively shattered the palace’s inviolateness and carefully managed image. The heavy crackdown on freedom of expression launched as a result has only attracted greater scrutiny in turn. It did not help matters that Queen Sirikit took public initiatives widely interpreted as supportive of the PAD in 2008, or that King Bhumibol has yet to utter a single word about the murder of Red Shirt demonstrators in 2010. With regard to the monarchy, Thaksin and the Red Shirts did not have to say or do anything at all, save for stepping out of the way of the one-time juggernaut careening toward the precipice of historical oblivion.

## 5. SAUVE QUI PEUT

E.E. Schattschneider (1988[1960]: 66) singled out “the definition of alternatives” as “the supreme instrument of power.” The capacity to define alternatives, to shape the definition of what conflict is about, is among the most significant and enduring powers Thailand’s palace acquired under Bhumibol’s leadership. With the coup d’état of September 19, 2006, palace insiders may have effectively wielded this instrument of power for the last time. Nowhere was the fight against Thaksin defined in more impactful terms than in a speech Privy Council President General Prem Tinsulanonda delivered at the Chulachomklao Royal Military Academy two months before the coup. “Soldiers are like horses,” he memorably quipped, “governments are jockeys but not the owners.” As if to dispel any doubt, Prem reminded his audience: “You belong to the Nation and His Majesty the King” (*The Nation*, July 15, 2006). The simple imagery invoked by the old general offers a measure of the ideological regression Thailand has undergone during the Ninth Reign. In 1932, the revolutionists of the People’s Party had seized power by asserting that “the country belongs to the people, not to the King, as he has fraudulently claimed.” The very claim the

Promoters had dismissed as fraudulent was decidedly back in fashion seventy-four years later, to the point of serving as the centerpiece of the public case made to legitimize the removal of an elected government and the disposal of a democratic constitution. In Prem's formulation, sovereignty rests with the King, as well as an idea of "the nation" quite distinct from "the people" who selected the "jockey." To the "jockey," and to the overwhelming majority of the electorate, the "horse" shall pay no heed, if the "owner" so commands. Elections, after all, weigh each person's vote equally, thereby distorting the will of a nation whose very essence, whose main claim to exceptionalism and uniqueness, is a hierarchy of merit, status, and power atop which sits His Majesty the King.

As much as Thaksin himself, it was thanks to royalists like General Prem that the fight became, implicitly, about the unfinished business of the 1932 revolution. Five years on, the decision to frame the fight as a choice between Thaksin and the King, grounding Thaksin's removal in the denial of popular sovereignty, the repudiation of majority rule, and the advocacy of hierarchical over egalitarian understandings of "the nation," might seem reckless and shortsighted. Aside from bringing back to the foreground a century-old cleavage they had largely managed to suppress over the past several decades, royalists disregarded the dangers of pitting the institution of the monarchy against a popular Prime Minister, to say nothing of the millions of voters who elected him. Whatever the extent, if any, of Bhumibol's involvement in the 2006 coup, the 2010 massacre, and the intervening manipulations of Thailand's judicial system, the mere fact that none of it could have happened but for legitimacy borrowed from the throne inevitably turned the monarchy into a focal point for the anger and frustration of many among those whose choices had been rubbished so contemptuously. Judging from the results of general elections held on July 3, 2011, royalists are not winning the fight they helped define in these terms. Not only did an overwhelming majority of voters defy instructions issued by the Commander-in-Chief of the Army, among others, to vote for the Democrat Party to "protect the monarchy" (see *Bangkok Post*, June 15, 2011), siding instead with a party led by Thaksin's own flesh and blood. Pheu Thai in fact went some way towards replicating Thai Rak Thai's success in the 2005 election, regaining the support of many middle class voters in Bangkok who had deserted Palang Prachachon in 2007. If perhaps not the King himself, the 2011 elections are a comprehensive repudiation of the informal network of power over which His Majesty has long presided.

In all likelihood, the juxtaposition of Thaksin with the King was designed to accomplish the exact opposite — the intent, that is, was to "privatize," not "socialize," the conflict, counting on the

people's reverence for the King, and their acceptance of social hierarchies that give the King's associates the right to speak for "the nation," to secure the public's acquiescence to Thaksin's removal. In this sense, the approach was no different from previous royalist coups, exception made for the heavy use of royal symbolism and ritual, whose dosage was increased to levels commensurate with the Prime Minister's popularity. What Prem and his fellow travelers failed to grasp, or simply chose to ignore, is the extent to which Thai society had changed over the previous half-century, in terms of both the people's prevailing attitudes and their propensity to join political fights from which the vast majority had once been excluded. To be sure, the "horse" effortlessly dismounted the "jockey," as Thaksin proved powerless to either prevent the coup or challenge its legality *ex post facto*. Unlike most of his predecessors, however, Thaksin failed to roll over and die, and struck back by leveraging his supporters' ambition to be recognized as equal citizens, to be acknowledged as "the nation's rightful owners," to turn much of the audience in the bleachers against those lounging in the owners' box. The riot in the stands eventually transcended demands for the jockey's reinstatement, as the crowd in the cheap seats went so far as to claim ownership of the horse — indeed, the entire racetrack.

After years of instability and turmoil, there are signs that at least some in the royalist camp may be inclined to accommodate the jockey's private demands, rather than deal with the riotous mob he helped incite. As others have pointed out (see Montesano 2011), the repressive measures taken after the dispersal of the Red Shirt demonstrations in 2010, and the decision to keep UDD leaders locked up for many months thereafter, had the effect of maximizing Thaksin's control over a movement that had, in the meantime, developed a set of demands independent of his base personal interests. Indeed, that could possibly have been the objective — deal with Thaksin to foil a more radical challenge to the status quo. At a minimum, the royalist establishment's subsequent consent to an election, even at the cost of walking into a humiliating defeat, reflects a changed strategic calculus in which a Thaksin-dominated administration has become preferable to the backlash that preventing one might have incurred. At this point there seems to be little doubt that Thaksin the jockey is prepared to cut any deal that might allow him to get back on the saddle, or take a seat in the owners' box, even at the cost of sacrificing his supporters' demands for legal accountability, freedom of expression, and "real" democracy. How the Red Shirt movement might react to this eventuality remains an open question, one that may ultimately reveal whether the Red Shirts have any potential as a transformational force, beyond the minimum objective of undoing the 2006 coup. Still, whatever settlement is reached, and as hard as royalists might try to restore its viability, Thailand's "formal democracy with the King above

the constitution” will not outlive the current monarch. Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn will never exercise the über-constitutional role asserted by his father.

Conservative thinker Sulak Sivaraksa (cited in Schiller 2011) recently speculated that the monarchy’s survival beyond the Ninth Reign turns on whether “the new king is willing to be a puppet.” “Puppet” may be too strong a word for it, but the fact remains that unless the palace reconciles itself to playing a constitutional, ceremonial role — that which it had been forced to accept, at the barrel of a gun, on June 24, 1932 — in the end the result might well be a republic. Indeed, though Thailand’s royalist establishment retains much of its power, it has now lost the legitimacy that once allowed it to impose its will without the application of physical coercion. The recent recourse to bullets and emergency rule, as well as the hundreds of arrests for *lèse majesté*, are in this sense symptomatic of the increased uselessness of royalist propaganda. Having already squandered the authority required to exercise power *without* force, royalists may now also be on the verge of losing the ability to get their way *through* force. After the passing of King Bhumibol, the only member of the royal family who still commands the requisite levels of support, respect, and fear, there is virtually no chance that large or significant enough segments of the Thai public will accept the old canard about “protecting the monarchy” as justification for the suspension of their civil and political rights, or the draconian measures that currently strangle freedom of expression.

For a variety of reasons, that itself will not suffice to bring about a “real” democracy, with or without the “king as head of state.” On the one hand, whether or not the excuse of “protecting the monarchy” is still available, the military will remain a threat to the stability of the country and its democratic prospects for some time to come. On the other hand, if ultimately allowed to take place, the re-assertion of Thaksin’s electoral dominance might simply amount to the revival of his illiberal brand of plebiscitarian or delegative democracy, possibly in a form imposing checks on his powers even more casual than in Thai Rak Thai’s heyday. Either way, the monarchy’s own survival now likely hangs on its willingness to cease standing in the way of the country’s democratization, and support a process of genuine reform. At present, there is no appetite in Thailand, on any side of the country’s political divide, for anything other than a constitutional monarchy. Indeed, there is no compelling reason why Thailand should have any other form of government, which in other contexts has proven quite compatible with a functioning representative democracy. Then again, the hunger for alternatives is sure to grow rapidly, should the next King refuse to make peace with reality.

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