

THAILAND’S MOMENT OF TRUTH

A SECRET HISTORY OF 21ST CENTURY SIAM

[#THAISTORY](#) | PART TWO OF FOUR | VERSION 1.0 | 240611

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“Broad-brushed efforts against all unflattering mention of the institution, King, Queen, and Crown Prince through crude application of the blunt instrument of lese majeste laws, without distinction between those who actually intend ill towards the monarchy and those expressing opinions which otherwise would not find an audience, may end up undermining the institution the law is meant to protect -- an unintended consequence akin to the People's Alliance for Democracy's (PAD) extreme actions in 2008 and the Queen's ill-advised patronage of the October 13 funeral of a PAD demonstrator.” - U.S. cable [08BANGKOK325](#), February 6, 2009.

กำแพงมีหู ประตุมีตา

- Thai proverb

“Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave

My heart into my mouth: I love your majesty

According to my bond; no more nor less.”

- Cordelia to Lear in William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Act I Scene I

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NOTES

There are several ways to transliterate Thai into English, and there is little agreement even on basic ground rules. The U.S. cables often use eccentric spelling for Thai names, and often use several different spellings, sometimes even within a single cable. Quotes from the cables and other sources are reproduced verbatim, even if this means conflicting spellings in the text of the article.

I have followed three rules in my redaction policy for this story: 1. If the source of information is a player in the game, their identity is not redacted. 2. The exception to this is if identifying the source could subject them to significant risk of physical harm. 3. If the source is not a player in the game, their identity, and other information that could help identify them, has been redacted. Xs in the text signify redaction. It should be noted that the number of Xs used has been deliberately randomized. Counting the number of Xs will not provide any secret insight into the source.

My name is Andrew MacGregor Marshall. I am not based in Thailand. There is an excellent Bangkok-based freelance journalist called Andrew Marshall, who writes for Time magazine among other publications and authored a book on Burma, *The Trouser People*. He has nothing to do with this article and obviously should not be held responsible for anything I write.

This story is dedicated to the people of Thailand and to the memory of my colleague Hiroyuki Muramoto, killed in Bangkok on April 10, 2010.

IV. “THESE PEOPLE LIVE IN AN ALTERNATE REALITY”

In December 2005, in his annual birthday speech, King Bhumibol [made an admission](#) that startled many Thais: [he is not perfect](#):

When you say the King can do no wrong, it is wrong. We should not say that... Actually I want them to criticize because whatever I do, I want to know that people agree or disagree... Actually I must also be criticized. I am not afraid if the criticism concerns what I do wrong, because then I know. Because if you say the King cannot be criticized, it means that the King is not human... If they criticize correctly, I have no problem.

It was a jarring comment in a country where the monarch has for centuries been portrayed as a figure of ultimate sagacity and insight, and where perceived disrespect towards the palace has been punished with draconian penalties.

In centuries past, as H.G. Quaritch Wales explains in *Siamese State Ceremonies*, it was forbidden for a commoner even to touch royalty - even to rescue them if they were drowning.

On board the royal barges there are, or were until recently, bundles of cocoa-nuts intended to be thrown to the king or any member of the royal family in the event of the barge foundering, for it was forbidden on pain of death for any person to lay hands on royalty to save them from drowning. A well known instance of the operation of this taboo is the tragic death of King Rama V's first queen, who was drowned in full view of numerous bystanders who dared not save her. [Quaritch Wales, *Siamese State Ceremonies*]

He provides a translation from the Kata Mandirapdla, or Book of Palace Law, a royal manuscript dated 1805 and said to have existed in almost the same form from about the 15th century:

If a boat (royal barge) founders, the boatmen must swim away; if they remain near the boat they are to be executed. If the boat founders and the royal person falls into the water and is about to drown let the boatmen stretch out the signal-spear and throw the cocoa-nuts so that he may grasp them if he can. If he cannot, they may let him seize the signal-spear. If they lay hold of him to rescue him they are to be executed. He who throws the cocoa-nuts is to be rewarded with forty ticals of silver and one gold basin. If the barge sinks and someone else sees the cocoa-nuts thrown and goes to save the royal person, the punishment is double and all his family is to be exterminated. If the barge founders and someone throws the cocoa-nuts so that they float towards the shore (i.e. away from the royal person), his throat is to be cut and his home confiscated. [*Kata Mandirapdla*, quoted in Quaritch Wales, *Siamese State Ceremonies*]

The worst offence of all was to touch the head of a king. Quaritch Wales says sensible considerations underlay this ancient taboo:

It appears to me that this taboo has in times past been the most important of all in maintaining

the mystery and air of sanctity essential to the preservation of the idea of Divine Kingship, and that it has also had much practical value in keeping the king's person safe from physical harm, especially the dagger of the assassin. [Quaritch Wales, *Siamese State Ceremonies*]

Other taboos were looking at the face of the king, allowing the king to come into contact with the ground, and even asking about the king's health:

This was because one was not allowed to presume that the King could be subject to the ills of the flesh as were ordinary mortals. In the same way it was taboo to allude directly to the death of the King, the term used to express this event being "to migrate to heaven". Illness and death are perhaps the greatest dangers that Divine Kingship had to face; hence the enormous value of this taboo, the necessity of keeping the people in ignorance of the fact that kings have but mortal frames. [Quaritch Wales, *Siamese State Ceremonies*]

Such rules have mostly faded into obscurity, of course, but one immensely important piece of legislation remains in force, stifling almost all debate on the monarchy in Thailand: article 112 on lèse majesté law. Any insult, defamation or threat directed at the king, queen or crown prince is punishable by three to 15 years in jail. In practice, this has come to mean that any reference to the palace that is not unquestioningly hagiographic is avoided.

Instead of dying out as Thailand entered the 21st century, enforcement of the lèse majesté law has seen a dramatic resurgence. Under the current administration of Prime Minister Abhisit, installed with the help of the military in December 2008, the use of the lèse majesté law to silence critics of the Thai establishment has reached unprecedented levels. Abhisit's government and the generals in charge of Thailand's military insist that protecting the institution of the monarchy is their highest priority, and that this is the reason for their frequent use of the law.

In February 2009, the Thai government delivered a protest to the American ambassador for ASEAN affairs, Scot Marciel, complaining about how the annual U.S. human rights report had referred to lèse majesté legislation and prosecutions. The Thai statement included a detailed justification of the law and its implementation:

We are greatly disappointed by the U.S. State Department's human rights report concerning lese-majeste provision, which is part of Thailand's Criminal Code.

The U.S. State Department's human rights report clearly illustrates a great misunderstanding of lese-majeste law, mainly its application, since it also contains general provisions on defamation and libel of private individuals.

The rationale of the law is simple. The law is there to protect Thailand's national security because under the Thai Constitution, the monarchy is one of Thailand's principal institutions. This is also necessary as the King and other members of the Royal Family are above politics. The Constitution does not allow them to comment or act in their own defense. Therefore, this is the same rationale as the law on contempt of court. These institutions should remain above conflicts

and not be drawn into one.

Thailand upholds people's rights to freedom of speech and expression; such rights are guaranteed by the Thai Constitution. The lese-majeste law is not aimed at curbing neither these rights nor the legitimate exercise of academic freedom including the debates about the monarchy as an institution. All cases mentioned in the report, including the case of Giles Ungpakorn are under the due process of law and are subject to further proof of evidences and facts.

Given the Thai peoples, appreciation of the King's devotion to their well-being during his reign, most Thais are deeply reverent and highly protective towards their King, hence their low tolerance for those suspected for lese-majeste. Such is part of the cultural or social values that have shaped the Thai public's views regarding the lese-majeste law and the protection of the monarchy as a principal national institution.

Due to our countries, longstanding relationship of more than 175 years, Thailand and the U.S. have formed a close bond of friendship especially at the people-to-people level, therefore the insensitivities of this report have had a tremendous impact on the sentiments of the Thai people, particularly when the U.S. is regarded as our closest friend.

We urge the U.S. Department of State to properly address and rectify the misunderstandings in this report in order to prevent the further misinterpretation of Thailand's lese-majeste law, in which the Thai people abide by in their daily lives. [09BANGKOK520]

But as David Streckfuss argues in his study of the country's culture of defamation, *Truth on Trial in Thailand: Defamation, Treason, and Lèse Majesté*:

The difficulty for defenders of the law is to explain how the institution of Thai monarchy could be so utterly loved if it required the most repressive *lèse majesté* law the modern world has known.

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Three key points about the *lèse majesté* law emerge clearly from the U.S. embassy cables. Firstly, U.S. diplomats believe that far from serving to protect the king, the recent heavy handed use of the law is actually doing considerable damage to the monarchy. Secondly, considerable evidence suggests Bhumibol himself agrees with this assessment, and far from supporting widespread use of the *lèse majesté* law, he supports reforming it to allow greater freedom of speech. Thirdly, the increasing pace of *lèse majesté* accusations and charges appears directly linked to the struggle over the royal succession, as some of those fighting for supremacy use the law to silence critics and persecute opponents in defiance of Bhumibol's wishes. As Eric John commented in a 2009 cable:

The RTG's arrests of individuals under the lese majeste provisions of the criminal code and the 2007 Computer Crime Act are intended to protect the monarchy. Ironically, the heightened pace of arrests and charges, especially those involving prominent figures, may cause liberal-minded

Thais to resent restrictions on speech and to associate the monarchy with acts of repression, weakening domestic support for the institution the legal actions seek to protect. This issue and the controversy it generates will likely continue through royal succession, as various parties position themselves for the inevitable redefinition of the institution of monarchy and its role in Thai society once the revered King Bhumibol passes from the scene. [09BANGKOK610]

Abhisit had long been viewed by Western governments as an urbane and progressive politician - far more so than Thaksin who was regarded with suspicion and scepticism. The cables record Ambassador's John's growing unease over the Abhisit administration's restrictions on free speech:

Legal action in the courts and against websites on grounds of lese majeste, or offense to the monarchy, have seemingly increased under the new Democrat-led coalition government, with both the Justice Minister and the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Minister having stated publicly that combating lese majeste violations is their top priority. Those recently charged, arrested, or convicted include Marxist Professor Giles Ungpakorn, website commentator Suwicha Thakor, and "redshirt" supporter Bunyuen Prasoeitying. For its part, the ICT Ministry has flagged over 10,000 URLs that contained content deemed offensive to the monarchy, with 2,000 such URLs already blocked. The Bangkok-based distributor of The Economist halted distribution of an issue for the third time in two months due to an article which touched on the alleged role of the monarchy in politics.

Comment: While the political crisis that gripped Thailand the second half of 2008 has disappeared from the streets for now, the deep gulf in Thai society and the body politic remains, and the eventual fate of the monarchy is one of the key cleavage lines. The struggle by many parties for position and advantage in shaping public perceptions in anticipation of the passing of the revered King, a potential messy succession involving the far less respected Crown Prince, and the almost certain redefinition of the role of the institution of monarchy continues unabated.

Comment, continued: Many of the Democrat Party leaders who have moved into top government positions are cosmopolitan, well-educated people who nevertheless appear to be facilitating growing efforts to clamp down on forms of speech critical of the monarchy. Whether that is primarily out of personal conviction or political advantage, or both, remains unclear. Thailand has a reasonably strong and active civil society, however, that promotes changing societal attitudes towards traditional institutions and behavioral norms; this issue will not be easily swept under the carpet. Broad-brushed efforts against all unflattering mention of the institution, King, Queen, and Crown Prince through crude application of the blunt instrument of lese majeste laws, without distinction between those who actually intend ill towards the monarchy and those expressing opinions which otherwise would not find an audience, may end up undermining the institution the law is meant to protect -- an unintended consequence akin to the People's Alliance for Democracy's (PAD) extreme actions in 2008 and the Queen's ill-advised patronage of the October 13 funeral of a PAD demonstrator...

Justice Minister Pirapan stated to the press January 14 that protecting the monarchy was his top priority. He referred to the monarchy as "the pillar of national security," and explained

that “freedom of speech might have to be compromised for the sake of national security.” Pirapan called on January 24 for the MFA to instruct Thailand's diplomatic missions abroad to launch public relations campaigns about lese majeste laws and the legal repercussions for insults to the monarchy, according to the media. In similar fashion, ICT Minister Ranongrak Suwanchawee has said publicly that blocking websites with content offensive to the monarchy is her top priority. Ministry sweeps of the Internet had flagged over 10,000 URLs that contained content offensive to the monarchy, and 2,000 such URLs had already been blocked.

The Senate established the “Special Senate Committee to Follow-up on Enforcement of the Lese Majeste Law” January 23 in a 90-17 vote. The committee, proposed by Senator Khamnoon Sitthisamarn and headed by national police chief Patcharawat Wongsuwan, is intended to ensure the enforcement of laws and articles relating to the protection of the monarchy, in a move that some human rights activists termed as “McCarthy-like.” The committee appears to have already established a Thai-language website, www.protecttheking.net, which provides an online form for people to report lese majeste.

For its part, the Army maintains a special unit tasked with tracking and identify lese majeste offenses through 24-hour sweeps of websites, according to a leading NGO activist with close ties to security forces (see Ref C for an earlier description of such a military effort). The Army unit works closely with the Department of Special Investigations (DSI), had superior surveillance technology than the ICT Ministry, aimed to focus on “high-profile” offenders with the highest audience reach, and was known to visit them at their homes, according to the expert. [\[09BANGKOK325\]](#)

The cable refers to the disturbing treatment of one Thai recently charged with lèse majesté:

Department of Special Investigation (DSI) police arrested oil rig engineer Suwicha Thakhor on January 14 after seizing his computer equipment. Media reports alleged that Suwicha's employer fired him following the arrest, and he remained in prison without bail after police deemed him to be at risk for repeating his online remarks. An NGO expert familiar with the case told us on January 30 that Suwicha had posted something “really bad” about the Crown Prince and had included pornographic photos of the Crown Prince's consort, Princess Srirasmi. (Note: two sets of nude photographs of Srirasmi, believed to have been taken at the Crown Prince's direction before being leaked, started circulating in Thailand in 2007. Similar photos of the Crown Prince's latest mistress have recently started circulating on the internet, according to several contacts who claim to have seen them.)

The cable quotes an NGO source as saying Suwicha was “denied bail, denied immediate access to a lawyer, and confessed before having such access” after a chilling threat by police:

Police had extracted a confession from Suwicha after they threatened to bring the Crown Prince to the jail for a face-to-face meeting. [\[09BANGKOK325\]](#)

Suwicha was [later sentenced to 10 years in jail](#).

The cable notes that in a further extension of the pervasive culture of secrecy in Thailand, the authorities also attempted to suppress all information about their lèse majesté crackdown:

Widespread online and print media coverage of Suwicha's arrest prompted Justice Minister Pirapan Salirathavibhaga to request on January 15 that all lese majeste-related arrests not be disclosed. Pirapan reportedly instructed DSI to help stem media coverage of any radio station closures, website censorship, or arrests related to lese majeste.

United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) supporter Bunyuen Prasoeitying was sentenced to six years' imprisonment on November 6, after having been held without bail since August 15, for remarks made at a pro-Thaksin rally earlier in 2008. However, media reports of the sentencing did not surface until January 7, when online news media site Prachatai.com reported the story. To our knowledge, no Thai-language printed news source reported on the conviction; online blogs and other websites provide links to the Prachatai.com report. [\[09BANGKOK325\]](#)

In March 2009, John noted evidence that Bhumibol - and Sirindhorn - did not support harsh application of the lèse majesté law, citing Rama IX's 2005 birthday statement that "the king can do wrong". He suggested that the main supporters of the crackdown were other royals and their backers as the conflict over succession intensified:

A number of international commentators, including a landmark December 2008 edition of the Economist, have criticized King Bhumibol for not intervening in the current burst of lese majeste activity. In fact, the King's most extensive comments on the matter, given during his annual birthday speech in 2005, put him on the side of minimal use of a tool that sources close to the palace claim that he and his daughter Princess Sirindhorn do not support...

Others members of the royal family and those close to it, however, appear to have a different view, particularly of criticism not directed at the King but the institution itself and the other two individuals covered by lese majeste: the Queen and Crown Prince. [\[09BANGKOK610\]](#)

Further evidence to support this view emerged in early 2010, when the king held a private audience with Abhisit on January 18 in Siriraj Hospital:

After the Ministerial swearing in concluded, the King asked Abhisit to stay behind for an hour long one-on-one discussion; the focus was application of lese majeste provisions, according to a trusted, long-time Embassy contact who heard it from the person Abhisit subsequently briefed on his session with the King, Justice Ministry PermSec Kittipong. Kittipong serves as the Chair of a Committee Abhisit established in November 2009 to review the implementation of lese majeste provisions. According to Kittipong, King Bhumibol told Abhisit he needed to review, with an eye towards reforming, the judicial procedures associated with lese majeste implementation. Such a review needed to proceed carefully, Bhumibol supposedly told Abhisit, but he was aware any changes would primarily affect one person – himself. The King also reportedly reminded

Abhisit that as King he had the ability to pardon anyone convicted on lese majeste grounds.

Note: King Bhumibol is on the public record, in his 2005 annual Birthday address, as stating clearly that he was not above criticism and in fact welcomed it. His comments then and now are a likely indication that he understands that lese majeste as currently implemented serves to weaken, not protect, the institution of monarchy. Bhumibol does have a track record of pardoning those convicted of lese majeste, though there are two prominent recent convictions of Thais for which pardon appeals have not been forwarded to the King. [[10BANGKOK287](#)]

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While it seems clear that Bhumibol is well aware of the damage being done to popular support for the palace - and in turn to the prospects for the long-term survival of the monarchy - by excessive use of the lèse majesté law to stifle debate, many powerful institutions and individuals have an interest in preserving secrecy and repression. Clearly, both Sirikit and Vajiralongkorn have their reasons for wanting to suppress information about their actions and political interventions. And besides the palace, one other institution above all is determined to prevent public scrutiny of its role: Thailand's military.

Among the greatest tragedies of Thailand's modern history - and the most damaging and prolonged misjudgment of Bhumibol's six decades on the throne - is the disastrous influence the military has been allowed to exert over the kingdom's politics. The military has never shown much interest in doing what a country's armed forces are supposed to do - protect the nation from external threats. The hapless Royal Thai Army even managed to come off second best in [a brief 1987/88 border war](#) with tiny impoverished neighbour Laos. As [McCargo](#) wrote [in a 2002 article](#):

[Thailand's] military is first and foremost an armed bureaucracy, which does not fight wars. Instead, military officers have preferred to devote their energies to the more interesting and satisfying professions of business and politics. Their core businesses have been smuggling, logging, and profiting from the country's natural resources. [McCargo, *Security, development and political participation in Thailand: alternative currencies of legitimacy*]

When Bhumibol became king of Thailand after World War II, the generals running the country treated him with barely disguised contempt. As he [told Barbara Crosette of the New York Times](#):

When I'd open my mouth and suggest something, they'd say: "Your Majesty, you don't know anything. So I shut my mouth. I know things, but I shut my mouth. They don't want me to speak, so I don't speak.

After that, I do some things that are within my rights and then they see that it is something that is all right. So they begin to understand that I am doing things not for my own enrichment or my own interest. It is for the whole country.

In 1957, Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat toppled Phibun and his cronies in a coup, and Bhumibol's fortunes started to improve. Handley describes Sarit as:

A cinematic picture of the Third World generalissimo: a smiling, generous man of the people, a heavy drinker, an opium trafficker, a vain womanizer, and a ruthless dictator who summarily executed criminals and political rivals to scare others. None of that was important to the princes. What they appreciated was that, never having studied abroad, Sarit subscribed to the idea of a grateful and obedient peasantry under the traditional monarch and his loyal government. [Handley, *The King Never Smiles*]

As Bruce Lockhart, associate professor at the National University of Singapore, wrote in his 2009 paper *Monarchy and Constitution in Recent Thai History*:

Sarit cultivated a close relationship with the King and Queen and took great pains to heighten the monarchy's public role while also restoring some of the prerogatives removed under earlier regimes. His years in power are widely regarded as a watershed in the history of the Thai monarchy and as laying the foundations for the expansion of its prestige and authority in the decades to come. For much of [the period 1957-1973] there was no functioning parliament or constitution... The king maintained a relatively low profile in political terms, with little overt intervention in national affairs, but the "restoration" initiated by Sarit enabled him to gain the moral authority which would undergird his more active role after 1973.

Whatever his own personal morality - or lack thereof - Sarit was obsessed with imposing order and discipline on Thailand. And this has always been an objective central to Bhumibol's philosophy too. The two men became firm allies. In August 1959, [Time magazine reported](#) on Sarit's drive to make Thailand a more ordered and less chaotic society:

Sustaining himself on a diet of nuts and oranges (he had quit drinking) and working until all hours of the night, Sarit became not only Premier but the nation's chief fireman, policeman and garbage collector. He commanded housewives to hang their laundry out of sight, abolished pushcarts, opened sheltered markets, dispatched dredges to the silted canals, bought 60 new garbage trucks for Bangkok, ordered pedicabs off the street. When a rash of fires broke out in the business district last winter, Sarit raced to the scene one night, ordered four Chinese merchants shot on the spot - a brutal but effective reminder that the annual custom of burning down shops to collect insurance for the Chinese New Year celebration was thenceforth taboo. Fortnight ago, prowling La Guardia-style about the streets of Bangkok in his chauffeur-driven car, Sarit drew up behind an automobile in which a woman sat eating fruit and throwing the peels out the window. The Premier characteristically took her license-plate number, ordered the police to pick her up and fined her 100 bahts (\$5) for littering.

As Thak Chaloemtiarana showed in his seminal 1979 work on the period, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotic Paternalism*, it was the beginning of a partnership between Bhumibol and the military that was to define Thailand's postwar history - and indeed the continuation of the military's symbiotic relationship with the palace that had its genesis much earlier:

By the middle of the 19th century, Siam's traditional allies had been pacified and colonized. The

creation of a modern and professional army seemed a moot issue in view of the military potential of the Western powers in the area. Siam was in no position to resist Western designs militarily if the case ever arose... Suffice it so say, the modern army was created not so much for external warfare or the defense of national integrity, but for the purposes of supporting and extending royal authority... [Thak, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotic Paternalism*]

Sarit may have been an alcoholic and a shameless womanizer (Thak writes that “practically no-one was immune to his overtures - beauty queens, movie stars, night club hostesses, university and secondary school students, the young and not so young”) but he was an ideal ally for the young Bhumibol:

On the one hand, he was seen as the completely dedicated leader, a firm and decisive person who made great personal sacrifices for the people... He was remembered as a doer and not a talker, whose firmness reduced the frequency of arson, got roads repaired, cleaned up the cities, improved communications, and advanced the economy.

On the other hand, Sarit was also seen as a *nakleng*, a person who was not afraid to take risks, a person who “lived dangerously”, kind to his friends but cruel to his enemies, a compassionate person, a gambler, a heavy drinker, and a lady-killer. In short, he was the kind of person who represented one central model of Thai masculinity. (The word *nakleng* itself has ambiguous connotations, but in male circles it is desirable to have friends who are *nakleng* at heart, for they will be loyal and trustworthy at times of need.) ...

The heroes of Thai folklore are often just such persons, who combine daring, courage, compassion, cruelty and gentlemanly debauchery. Thais seem to enjoy a gentleman crook.

And from the time Sarit seized power until the rumblings of discontent that led to the student uprising of 1973, the alliance between the military and monarchy appeared to have brought stability to Thailand:

Up until the late 1960s, paternalistic despotism seemed to have worked - there was stability both politically and economically - in part thanks to the Indochina policy of the United States. [Thak, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotic Paternalism*]

Bhumibol did not appear to feel that Thailand needed more democracy. And as Handley has convincingly argued, in both 1973 and 1992 Bhumibol was more dismayed by the popular protests against military rule than by the generals' efforts to cling on to power. But when it became clear that the country was on the brink of catastrophic conflict, he stepped in to try to impose a compromise that restored stability. These reluctant interventions to try to curb the military's worst excesses were later - misleadingly - celebrated as proof of the king's commitment to democracy.

In stark contrast to the events of 1973 and 1992, another of the bloodiest episodes in Thailand's modern history is rarely mentioned or discussed: the savage massacre of students at Bangkok's Thammasat University in October 1976.

Bhumibol's apparent intercession on the side of democracy in 1973 masked a sharp rightward lurch in

the political views of both the king and Sirikit in the 1970s as the threat from communism appeared to grow more dangerous. The fall of Saigon in Vietnam and the victory of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia in April 1975 were followed by the overthrow of the royal family of Laos by communist Pathet Lao insurgents in December. Undoubtedly feeling increasingly besieged and imperiled, the palace sponsored and supported the creation of ultra-right-wing nationalist militias in the 1970s, most notably the Village Scouts and Red Gaur, as well as a secretive extremist network of officials, Navapol. By 1976, Sirikit in particular was openly condemning pro-democracy activists and expressing support for the security forces to run the country. In September, exiled former military ruler Thanom returned to Thailand with palace support and was ordained as a monk at Wat Bornivores, regarded as the personal temple of the Chakri dynasty ever since King Mongkut had been abbot there. Students responded with several mass rallies. By early October, thousands of protesting students had gathered inside the walled campus of Thammasat University on the Chao Phraya riverside north of the Grand Palace. On October 5, photographs of a mock hanging staged by protesting students inside the campus were published in some Thai newspapers; it was alleged this had been intended to represent the hanging of Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn, although in fact it had been a protest over the murder of two trade unionists by police in Nakhon Pathom a week earlier. Spurred on by hysterical radio broadcasts accusing the students of lèse majesté and urging “kill them, kill the communists”, thousands of royalist paramilitaries had massed outside the campus by evening.

Shortly before sunrise on October 6, the massacre began. A [report in Time magazine](#) describes what followed:

By dawn, an enraged mob of 10,000 rightists armed with rifles, swords and clubs began attacking Thammasat. They were met by M-16 gunfire and grenades. Then the troops moved in. Spearheaded by a dump truck that smashed through the main gate, Thai paratroops, border guards and marines rushed in. Peppering the buildings with small arms fire, grenades and anti-tank shells, the soldiers swept through the campus. The toll: 41 dead (only two of them police) and 180 injured. "They were out for blood," said one Western newsman who had covered the war in Viet Nam. "It was the worst firefight I've ever seen." Huddled in terror on the central soccer field, student captives were stripped to the waist and kicked around by swaggering soldiers. Shoes, watches, eyeglasses and golden Buddha medallions were confiscated. The wounded were left to bleed—drawing flies in the noonday sun, while military doctors awaited "instructions" from their commanders. A few desperate students managed to escape by the Chao Phya River at the rear of the campus. Others who ran for the streets were set on by the rightist mob. Several were beaten close to death, then hanged, or doused with gasoline and set afire. One was decapitated. The bodies of the lynched victims strung up on trees were mutilated by rioters, who gouged out their eyes, slit their throats and lashed at them with clubs and chains.

A [detailed chronology of the massacre](#) by Thammasat rector Puey Ungpakorn, augmented by anonymous testimony, was published in the Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars in 1977. The NSCT is the National Student Centre of Thailand, which had organized the student protests:

00.00 (Midnight) About two thousand students and others (workers and rickshaw drivers are mentioned) were gathered in Thammasat University holding a discussion, with plays and music. Some hundreds of people gather outside the gate with newspaper photographs of the

alleged "prince-hanging" incident. Wall posters are torn down and burned, and a show made of entering the university. Some police are present to assess and control the situation. Army controlled radio urges police and people to break in. To encourage civilians it said that 300 of their number were actually out-of-uniform police...

03.00 a.m. Special police forces or anti-riot police completely encircle the university, including three police boats on the [Chao Phraya] river that forms the rear boundary of the university. A police headquarters is set up at the nearby National Museum, indicating the seriousness of the operation envisaged. When the Police Chief arrived with other key officers at a nearby station, he declared his intention to clear the university at dawn and to arrest the culprits of the alleged lese-majeste incident. Questioned on the responsibility for such a command, he replied that it was his own. Crowd at gate set fire to a rubbish cart and try to stir up the situation by throwing burning objects into Thammasat. No reaction from the students.

04.00 a.m. Police report seeing armed students near river bank and warn boats not to aid escape. Incidents at gate increase, led by right-wing paramilitary Red Gaurs. Sentry box burned and burning objects thrown. Numbers increase. Some gunfire in the area reported...

05.00 a.m. Serious shooting breaks out as Red Gaurs and others make attempts to break in. Missiles including explosives and handgrenades thrown in. Explosion occurs where students are gathering and many injured, some seriously. At this stage Red Gaurs lead the armed offensive with police acquiescence. Students hold off attack by firing and one man shot in chest. (He later died as he was taken to hospital.) Students take cover in the buildings of the university.

05.40 a.m. Police began to fire from the M79 rocket launcher [near the museum]. There was a big explosion in front [part] of the campus. As a result, 16 people were simultaneously injured, eight seriously wounded, and one killed. The Red Gaurs, police and soldiers tried to enter the campus. The crowd of 4,000 which have been in the campus since October 4 began to disperse, rushing to several buildings which surround the rally ground. The crowd was even more frightened when firing followed, apparently from M16 and AK33 assault rifles. The NSCT's security guards resisted by firing back.

05.50 a.m. Some members of the Red Gaurs and the village scouts tried to break through the campus gate by using a bus that they had hijacked several hours earlier. Police, Red Gaurs and soldiers followed suit by climbing the iron wall which guards the university. Some of them managed to get in. The Armour Radio, meanwhile, called for a total surrender on the part of the NSCT. It also claimed that police had been injured by the students' firing. Apparently the crowd in the campus were not aware that they had been under attack from both the police and the Red Gaurs. Their impression at the time was that the NSCT's security guards were fighting with the Red Gaurs who had tried to come in as before. Seeing that firing had become intensified, they tried to get out. However, all the exits were blocked.

06.00 a.m. A small number of wounded are brought out by ambulance, two by boat. Further evacuation by boat stopped by police. Sounds of automatic rifles heard. Police sharpshooters

begin to fire. Police in boats claim that students had opened fire with handguns, later they claimed heavy weapons such as M-16s and AK-47s were used. Navy police reinforce river. Simultaneous firing from river and other side of the university by both police and Red Gaurs. Student leaders, realising the scale of the attack, consult persons at the rally; they declare that they must fight back having nothing further to lose. Speaker announces many may die but appeals to students who survive to transmit their anger... Meanwhile the death toll had increased to four persons. In an attempt to escape from the shooting, students retreated to the river bank behind the campus. Some of them escaped into the river only to find that the navy patrollers fired on them. Those students who tried to take the wounded out [of the campus compound] to the hospitals were not allowed to leave. The police had blocked all the exits.

06.15 a.m. The fighting kept on. The NSCT appealed for a cease fire and said that they were willing to surrender before more died. There was no response from the police.

06.20 a.m. Border-patrol police and police from every other station in Bangkok were mobilized to the campus.

06.30 a.m. Another three students died as the M-79 rocket launcher was fired from near the museum. The NSCT again appealed for a total ceasefire and added that the wounded should be sent to hospitals. Not only was there no response; the Red Gaur and police again attacked students who tried to get out of the campus. The NSCT leaders again called the Prime Minister's secretary to say that they were willing to disband the rally and ask for police protection. The secretary reportedly agreed.

07.00 a.m. Firing continues, police numbers increase. Some police injured. Three of the injuries (including one case in which a policeman's fingers were blown off) were caused by a Red Gaur car bomb that misdirected and exploded. Police claim that student weaponry is more efficient than their own. They call for reinforcements. Right-wing groups use two buses to crash through gates but back out as police fire from behind them continues. Police order all escape routes blocked and forbid boats to respond to appeals. Sutham Saengprathum, leader of the National Student Council of Thailand, and five student representatives, including the student who had acted in the controversial hanging incident, come out in ambulance and go in police car to the Prime Minister's house. They report many students are wounded. Their request to speak with the Prime Minister is denied and they are arrested by police.

07.10 a.m. The NSCT's political secretary, together with security guards, asked the police at one of the exits for permission to take the wounded out. No success. The shooting went on without interruption, and deaths were on the rise. The student rally's announcer who was announcing "we are willing to surrender" was killed immediately by an M-16 rifle shot.

07.30 a.m. "Free fire" orders given to police "to defend themselves." Police reinforcements arrive including over a hundred Border Patrol Police with heavy weaponry, hand grenade launchers, etc. Police paratroopers from Hua Hin also arrive. Bangkok police come, including Bangkok Police Chief who, declaring he is "ready to die," joins in the shooting. Police began invasion

of Thammasat. Many students wounded and killed. Student appeal to evacuate girls ignored. Some police wounded by student fire. More students tried to escape from the fighting by jumping into the river. Police navy patrollers shot at them indiscriminately. Several hundred others were arrested. With their shirts taken off; they were forced to lie down with their hands on the backs of their heads. Many were severely beaten. Many drowned [in the river]. The right-wing Armour Radio called on police to search carefully on the campus and in the nearby temples. Police started shooting from every side of the campus.

07:45 a.m. Police on the southern side of the campus warned people to stay out. An explosion erupted and one policeman died.

08:00 a.m. Police estimate seeing 20 students armed with handguns and rifles. Appeal to evacuate 50 wounded across river ignored.

08:15 a.m. Massive attack by Border Patrol Police and Red Gaur groups. Explosions every minute, probably from M-79 grenade launchers carried by Border Patrol Police. Rounds from heavy weapons carryover to food shops outside. Villagers on roof tops encourage police, saying students have no heavy guns.

08:20 a.m. Parachute police who had been airlifted from the south arrived. It was reported that a United Press International photographer had been shot and that the students who had escaped into the river had been fired on.

08:35 a.m. Fighting was particularly intense.

08:37 a.m. Students who had been arrested on the opposite bank of the river continued to lie on the footpath with their shirts off and their hands on their heads. They were to remain in that position for three hours. Those who had sought refuge in the nearby shops were told to give up, or else the police would fire indiscriminately into the shops which refused to open their gates.

08:50 a.m. The right wing groups began to hold a rally in front of the Parliament House. They were joined by Village Scouts who had finished their mission in front of the Thammasat University campus.

08:55 a.m. Students who tried to escape through the front gate were greeted by right-wing militants, the Red Gaur, and scores of police and soldiers who began to beat, club and fire at them. One student, his head severely beaten at the front gate, was shot in the presence of policemen. The student was later hung. A woman, apparently shocked by the outright brutality, asked: "Why must we Thais kill each other? Have we forgotten how many . lives were sacrificed driving out the tyrant trio three years ago?" No sooner had she finished speaking when a man rushed out of the crowd, pointing a finger at her. He threatened her and said: "Do you want to die!" Are you Vietnamese, you social scum?" Students and others in the campus were herded by the police onto the football grounds and forced to lie down with their shirts off. Both boys and girls.

09:00 a.m. Period of heavy fighting as police attack individual buildings and student bases. Two police killed. Many students wounded and killed. While police use heavy weaponry, Red Gaurs, Village Scouts and right-wing groups, having seized ten to fifteen wounded or escaping students including two girls, beat, mutilate, hang and burn them, occasionally with police watching. One girl stripped and shot repeatedly. Large numbers of students try to escape but are arrested.

09:06 a.m. The Red Gaurs began to pour kerosene on and to burn four people, one of whom was still alive.

09:20 a.m. Four students, their hands on their heads symbolizing surrender, came out through the front gate and were brutally beaten and shot by the Red Gaurs. One was hung. A girl, who had been shot to death, was sexually abused by plainclothes policemen; they used a stick on her vagina. At a nearby site, a man was severely beaten and burned. Another person was hung while he was still alive.

09:30 a.m. Meanwhile a Cabinet meeting was going on. Right-wing factions demanded the the three alleged communist ministers be dismissed. Prime Minister Seni Pramroj, saying that the Cabinet had just been appointed by the King 24 hours earlier, refused to do so. At a press conference, the Prime Minister tried to dissociate himself from the violence at Thammasat while admitting that he had ordered the police to clear the campus. He said, "It's up to the police to decide whether to use violent methods or not."

10:00 a.m. Students were taken to prisons in big buses. On their way they were occasionally beaten or robbed of their valuables as right-wing hooligans entered the buses. Several students who tried to escape from the buses were shot by the police... More students are brought to football field as they are arrested. Right-wing groups wander about kicking bodies, tearing off Buddhist emblems saying, "these communists are not really Buddhists." Atrocities continue outside Thammasat. Units of special action police stand and watch as two are hanged. Bodies dragged out, mutilated and burned. Large crowds watch. Several wounded or arrested students dragged from police and beaten or lynched. Police try to stop this action by firing in air; they manage to rescue one girl.

10:30 a.m. Police began searches in the university; rightwing elements followed suit. Fighting began to cease. Meanwhile, the crowd in front of the Parliament increased.

11:00 a.m. Renewed fighting in Thammasat. Police ordered to clear completely. Efforts by youths to seize wounded on way to hospital. Events tail off.

13:00 p.m. As rain poured down, the whole area in front of the Commerce Department building, where the heaviest fighting happened a few hours earlier, turned red with blood.

18:00 p.m. The crown prince addressed the Village Scouts who had moved on to the government house. He asked the crowd to disperse. An announcement was made that the country was

being taken over by a group of military officers calling themselves “the national administrative reform council.” Martial law was introduced and Bangkok's three years of experiment with a parliamentary system came to an end.

Note: According to figures released by the new regime, 41 persons died and several hundred people were injured. About 3,037 persons were taken prisoner of whom about over 600 were female. However, sources at the Chinese Benevolent Foundation, which transported and cremated the dead ... revealed that they had handled “over a hundred corpses” that day. [Ungphakorn, *Violence and the Military Coup*]

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Having played a key role in the events that led to the massacre, through deliberately fanning anti-communist hysteria and enabling Thanom's return from exile, the palace backed a far-right government after the coup, under Supreme Court judge Tanin Kraivixien.

The National Administrative Reform Council, as the new junta called itself, ruthlessly pursued leftists suspected of communist sympathies as well as any voice clamouring for a return to democracy. Thousands of students and intellectuals fled the country or retreated to the jungles - joining forces with the communist insurgency in Isan. Hundreds more were arrested on trumped up charges and tried in military tribunals.... By 1977, Tanin had become so unpopular - even the military found the cruelty and paranoid extremism of his regime distasteful - that the army deposed him in yet another bloodless coup. [Ferrara, *Thailand Unhinged*]

The actions of the palace need to be viewed in the context of the time: clearly Bhumibol believed that the monarchy faced an existential threat:

One one level, King Bhumibol's embrace of the violent right, as both its leader and its tool, was understandable. The cardinal duty of any sovereign king is to defend and sustain the monarchy. As communist regimes took power in neighbouring states and the Thai insurgency grew, the Mahidol family became obligated to ally itself against the forces that would protect the throne above all other. But this doesn't explain Bhumibol and Sirikit going so far as to aggravate a hysteria that turned one half of Thai society against the other half and left no room in the middle. It cast a shadow over the monarchical institution itself - the dhammaraja was no longer the nation's unifier. [Handley, *The King Never Smiles*]

Benedict Anderson's 1977 article *Withdrawal Symptoms: Social and Cultural Aspects of the October 2006 Coup*, brilliantly analyzes deeper social and ideological trends that led to the massacre, and which have telling echoes in the situation Thailand faces now. In particular, he argues that in the mid-1970s:

A whole concatenation of crises in Thai society began to crystallize around the symbol of the monarchy. The end of the long economic boom, the unexpected frustrations generated by rapid educational expansion, inter-generational estrangement, and the alarm caused by the American strategic withdrawal and the discrediting of the military leadership - these linked crises were

experienced most acutely of all by the insecure new bourgeois strata. One must remember that for these strata the monarchy was both a talisman and a moral alibi. The historical depth and solidity of the institution appeared as a kind of charm against disorder and disintegration. And whatever the venality of their lives or their actual economic and cultural dependence on foreigners, members of these strata felt their nationalist self-esteem morally guaranteed by their loyalty to the throne. Thus any assault, however indirect, on the legitimacy of the throne was necessarily sensed as a menace to that alibi.

In this situation, with many Thais deriving their sense of self-worth and the security of their place in the social hierarchy from the reassuringly stable centrality of the monarchy, the fear that the palace itself was under threat proved profoundly troubling and unsettling. Anderson points out that “the abolition of the Laotian monarchy in December... raised the alarming specter that Rama IX might prove the last of his line”:

The old ruling cliques, weakened by developments at home and abroad, have been seeking new domestic allies, and have found them in the bewildered, buffeted and angry middle and petty bourgeoisie.

Clinging ever more desperately to the ideology of “Nation-Religion-King”, many conservative Thais viewed pressure for democracy and political reform as an attack on the very survival of the monarchy and the whole basis of orderly Thai society, and reacted with “genuine cultural-ideological panic”. Mob violence became more commonplace: Anderson writes that “what is striking about the brutalities of the 1974-76 period is their... public and even mob character”. Instead of evolving to accommodate pressure especially from younger Thais for political change, the palace and military and their allies responded with brutal repression, its savagery fuelled by fear and lack of understanding. The country was left catastrophically divided and haunted by the risk of civil war.

The parallels with Thailand today are clear: disorientating panic that the monarchy may not survive, mob violence by insecure elements of the middle class who fear their hard-won status is under threat, and an inability of many at the top of the military and palace hierarchy to understand genuine social pressure for change, which they view instead as an alien challenge to the very foundations of the monarchy. The malevolent influence of the exiled Thaksin has replaced communism as the perceived external threat that must be crushed. And once again, Thailand is on the brink of sliding even deeper into turmoil as a result of an inability to accommodate social pressures and evolve peacefully.

Yet there is little prospect of the lessons of 1976 being learned, because the terrible events of that year have been excised from history due to their failure to fit the official myth of the palace leading the country towards democracy under the enlightened leadership of King Bhumibol. Thailand has done its best to forget the Thammasat massacre. In an [Al Jazeera interview in 2008](#), then-Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej, now dead, not only denied his own role in the 1976 violence but insisted that only one person had been killed; he became irate and abusive when his outrageous claims were challenged.

In a 1996 letter to students planning to commemorate the 20th anniversary of October 6, Thongchai Winichakul wrote:

It's as if it never happened, or as if its only value was to teach people how to forget.

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The official refusal to acknowledge the events of October 1976 is part of a wider pattern: there has *never* been proper investigation of and accountability for *any* of the darkest chapters in Thailand's modern history. In most of these episodes, the security forces were explicitly involved in the murder and oppression of Thai citizens, in the name of "defending the country" and "protecting the monarchy". As David Streckfuss says:

There has yet to be any sustained attempt to deal with any significant historical event that led to death, bloodshed or impunity over the past half-century: whether it is the treatment of the Muslim populations in the South of Thailand and the Tak Bai incident; the repression of the Sarit regime; the deaths in the run-up to, and during, the 1973 uprising; the massacre at Thammasat University in 1976; the crackdown on the May 1992 uprising; the extra-judicial killing of more than 2,500 suspected drug dealers during Thaksin's time in power; the 2006 coup; or the 2008 and 2009 PAD/UDD demonstrations.

As a result, Thailand has never been able to break out of the tragic cycle of crises and coups:

The cycle in Thailand has become so familiar it seems normal a coup is staged, the constitution is abolished, coup makers grant themselves an amnesty, a new constitution is drafted, new elections are held, the newly elected government is perceived as increasingly corrupt, a crisis ensues; the next coup is staged, and so on. [Streckfuss, *Truth on Trial*]

Following the 1992 popular uprising against military rule, and Bhumibol's dramatic televised intervention, it had appeared as if the country had at last turned a corner. The disgraced and humiliated military had suffered a crushing blow to its prestige that seemed to have destroyed its ability to ever again intervene in politics without a massive public backlash. And in 1997 a new progressive constitution was promulgated that strengthened the potential role the elected parliament could play in charting Thailand's future:

Following the debacle of the 1991 military coup and the violent suppression of prodemocracy protestors in May 1992, reordering was urgently needed. Bhumibol was growing older, and a political system that had come to rely on his strategic interventions was no longer sustainable. Power shifted away from the military and toward the liberal wing of network monarchy, led informally by ex-prime minister Anand Panyarachun, and prominent social critic Dr. Prawase Wasi. These two men were among the prime movers behind the 1997 "people's constitution," which sought to institutionalize representative politics, introducing a set of legal provisions designed to curb money politics and ensure the good behavior of politicians. In large part, these measures were designed to avert a postsuccession political crisis, getting the Thai system into better shape in advance of the next reign... The unwritten principles of the new constitution were simple: Good people would be able to enter politics, these good politicians would follow agreed

rules of the game, they would not challenge the power or prestige of the monarchy, and in return the monarchy would not interfere with their activities. [McCargo, *Thai Politics as Reality TV*]

In May 2005, Alexander Arvizu, deputy chief of mission at the U.S. embassy, reported on a gathering of relatives of those killed in the 1992 violence to lay the foundation stone for a memorial to the dead:

No Royal Thai Government (RTG) officials attended. Victims and their families lamented the fact that the RTG has never taken official responsibility for the deaths and injuries caused by security forces 13 years ago...

The simple Brahmin ceremony was officiated by social critic Dr. Prawes Wasi, who is also a member of the National Reconciliation Commission (NRC). Also present, in addition to many families who lost relatives in the crackdown, was opposition Democrat Party (DP) leader Abhisit Vejjajiva... A group of Northeastern farmers from the NGO Assembly of the Poor made up a large part of those gathered. Those farmers had come to Bangkok on May 16 to demonstrate at Government House about rural debt issues...

DP Leader Abhisit told the crowd that he felt a personal responsibility to those killed in May 1992 as he had made his initial foray into national politics as a Member of Parliament in the first elections held after the May 1992 crackdown. "While we are confident we won't return to a time of military rule again, we must continue the fight for democracy in order to honor those who have suffered so much," he said.

Officially there are 44 dead and 38 missing from the incident. Eleven persons are permanently disabled and approximately 47 more suffer long-term medical or psychological complications as a result of injuries sustained in the crackdown. [05BANGKOK3327]

One of the relatives, Arvizu said, "recounted his sadness upon reading the reports about the RTG's crackdown on [Muslim] demonstrators in October 2004 in Tak Bai, Narathiwat... He wondered if the Thai military or police would ever learn from their mistakes."

His doubts were well-founded, and Abhisit's confidence was misplaced. Just over a year later, a resurgent military seized power once again in yet another coup, yet again predicated upon the alleged need to protect the monarchy. The Royal Thai Army has persistently intervened in politics ever since, including [exerting significant pressure](#) on the inter-party horse-trading that propelled Abhisit to the premiership in late 2008. After the coup, the Council for National Security (CNS) reconstituted and revived a security structure that had been an essential element in the control capabilities of repressive communist-era military governments - the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC):

ISOC's roots lie in the Communist Suppression Operations Command (CSOC) of the 1960s. CSOC was established under the Anti-Communist Activity Act to provide Ministry of Defense (MOD) coordination for military, police and Ministry of Interior (MOI) operations against the communist movement in Thailand. A series of military governments in that era also used CSOC - in 1969 renamed ISOC - to facilitate their rule, including the bloody suppression of student-led

protests in 1976.

Critics have publicly labeled ISOC a power grab by the Army, or an attempt to institutionalize military governance. One subset of this criticism alleges that the new ISOC will allow the CNS to maintain control even after a democratic government is elected later this year. [07BANGKOK1754]

Even one of Thailand's senior generals who played a key role in the initial plans for the revived ISOC told the embassy the plan had been hijacked by hawks in the military in an effort to preserve their influence even after power was ostensibly handed back to a civilian government:

One of the key players in establishing the new ISOC... told us that the original intent was to provide such a legal framework to deal with security threats. For example, Thailand needed a legal structure to respond to a terrorist attack... Despite the genuine effort early on to draft a bill to provide a legal structure in times of crisis... hardline elements in the government have hijacked the Act as a means to maintain power after elections and the formation of a new government. "Hawks" have taken advantage of the power seized in the coup to enshrine into law a permanent role for the military to influence politics. [07BANGKOK5802]

The cable quotes a Thai analyst as likening the move to "a silent coup". Boyce adds in a closing comment:

The RTG already has an emergency law which enables it to give the security forces sweeping powers if the government declares an emergency and the parliament concurs. The ISA raises concerns because it makes it even easier for the government to give the military ill-defined powers that would seem to violate the Thai public's constitutional rights, in the name of protecting against ill-defined threats to national security. As Thailand moves closer to the general election and the end of any formal government role for the military, passage of the ISA would raise further concerns about the military's desire for continued influence in the political process. [07BANGKOK5802]

The Internal Security Act legislation enshrining the new security structure was so controversial that it even met with considerable resistance in the rubber-stamp National Legislative Assembly installed by the 2006 coup. Nonetheless, on the eve of the 2007 elections, a slightly watered-down version was passed into law. Boyce commented:

While few doubted the need for Thailand to develop a legal framework to respond to internal security threats, the manner in which the ISA passed has raised concerns about the post-election influence of the military. [07BANGKOK6244]

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Since 1932, Thailand's history has been shaped by the shifting balance of power between three institutions: the monarchy, the military, and parliament. For the vast majority of the time, the Royal

Thai Army has had the dominant role, usually - although not always - with the explicit backing of, and in alliance with, King Bhumibol. As Federico Ferrara writes in *Thailand Unhinged*, “the symbiotic relationship between the palace and the military has come at the expense of Thailand’s democracy”. In order to justify and legitimize their persistent and destructive meddling in Thai politics, the military and the network of powerful officials around the palace have fostered the myth that Bhumibol and the monarchy are under threat. And in the name of protecting the monarchy, democracy has been repeatedly abrogated and freedom of speech denied.

Social and political commentary on the monarchy - which has typically been a call to redefine the role of the monarchy or reform the *lèse majesté* law - is automatically understood as part of an organized republican movement. [Streckfuss, *Truth on Trial*]

The fiction that the military and royalist establishment in Thailand have always had the best interests of the people at heart, and have been consistently motivated by the need to protect the beloved Bhumibol from malevolent forces conspiring to destroy him, has become part of a wider myth in which unquestioning support for the monarchy - and by extension, uncritical acceptance of the actions carried out by the monarchy and elites in the name of protecting the palace - is a fundamental defining characteristic of what it means to be Thai.

Anybody who challenges the fairy tale that Thailand’s modern history has been a glorious march towards prosperity for all and towards the unique “Thai-style democracy” most appropriate for the country’s cultural context, with the palace, social elites and the generals all working hand in hand with the people to build a great kingdom and vanquish external threats seeking to sabotage Thai greatness, is accused of being not only an enemy of Bhumibol, but unforgivably and damningly “un-Thai”. As Nick Nostitz says in the first volume of *Red vs. Yellow*:

Both to its own population and to foreign countries the Thai state has long projected the image of the “Land of Smiles” based on a fabricated construct of “Thainess”, supported by a carefully built balance between military, politicians, bureaucracy and palace. The majority of the population was educated in line with a state ideology that allowed little space for critical interpretation of the system and its history.

In her extraordinary, impassioned essay *Why I Don’t Love the King*, exiled Thai labour activist Junya Yimprasert describes her own experience of indoctrination about the glories of the monarchy growing up in a Thai village, and her shattering realization that the truth was profoundly different, and asks “What and where are the root cause of the madness that has overtaken Thailand at the start of the 21st century?”:

Since the 2006 military coup in Thailand, the words ‘Love the King’ have been attacking my eyes from wrist bands, T-shirts, car stickers, posters, flags and banners, from radio, TV and internet, from bill-boards across almost every factory gate, footbridge and road-crossing. From every angle this Government-sponsored propaganda is smashed in people’s faces.

In my work overseas I am asked: “What happens if you don’t love the king?” Any Thai or non-Thai that attempts to express disgust or indignation at this Government-sponsored attempt to

dominate their thinking is at risk of being harassed, threatened, criminalised and even tortured.

The title of this essay aims to remind people, in Thailand and all over the world, that there is no law, because there can be no law, saying that a person must love the Thai King. Every citizen has the absolute right to state simply and openly that they do not love the Thai King.

But in Thailand's national ideology, in which unquestioning allegiance to the holy trinity of *chart, sasana, phra mahakasat* - nation, religion, king - is demanded, not loving the monarch is a sign of moral and mental degeneracy, of not being worthy to be considered Thai. As Streckfuss says:

The tendency in the exercise of the *lèse majesté* law in Thailand to conflate the institution of the monarchy with the person of the king has been compounded by an even greater conflation between the monarchy, Thai culture, and identity.

This is the reason that Eric John's "scenesetter" cables argue that Thailand's political crisis is "not only over redefining the institution of monarchy but, equally fundamentally, [what it means to be Thai](#)".

Any criticism of the established order, the role of the military, or the *lèse majesté* law, is treated as treasonous. Many of those in the monarchist elite and the military leadership have become so intoxicated by their own ideology that they cannot understand genuine pressure for change in any other way than seeing it as a direct attack on the monarchy and the very foundations of Thai identity:

To have anything less than absolute loyalty to the throne was tantamount to treason. It was - it is - all or nothing. Thai must be monarchists. Not being a monarchist is to be against the throne, and to be against the throne is not to be Thai. [Streckfuss, *Truth on Trial*]

An essential element in sustaining this ideology is the existence of a malevolent external threat hell-bent on overthrowing the monarchy and destroying the Thai state. For much of Thailand's modern history the threat was communism. In Stevenson's *The Revolutionary King* it was the Japanese spy Masanobu Tsuji, a comic-book supervillain dubbed the "God of Evil", "one of the worst men on the planet", a psychopath whose "grotesque machinations have been allowed to warp and mangle history". And now, it is Thaksin Shinawatra, the malevolent exiled billionaire, who has been cast in the role of enemy of the state, at the centre of a web of conspirators plotting Thailand's downfall.

Efforts by the Thai authorities to prove the existence of a conspiracy against the monarchy to justify their actions have been laughably inept. In April 2010, the Centre for the Resolution of Emergency Situations (CRES) - the name given to the military's ISOC security edifice during enforcement of the 2010 state of emergency - produced [a bizarre "mind-map"](#) which was said to show [the tentacles of the plot](#) to overthrow Bhumibol. It was [greeted with widespread incredulity](#) (for a brilliant mind map of my own story, look [here](#)). In August 2010 Anasuya Sanyal of ChannelNews Asia [published the full transcript](#) of a fascinating interview with Yanaphon Youngyuen, deputy director-general of the Thai Department of Special Investigation (DSI), roughly equivalent to the U.S. FBI. He explained that criticism of the monarchy was a direct assault on Thai national security:

There are gangs, foreign conspiracies, financial transfers, and so on, which can be considered as connected actions to attempt to insult the monarchy.

Many things need to be understood, firstly, about the words 'insulting the monarchy'. This term was included in the National Security law. Therefore, insulting the monarchy isn't just insulting, but also undermining national security. Because the monarchy in Thailand is highly involved with national security, and if our nation doesn't have security, our country can become unstable. So it's very important. The law clearly stipulates this in the national security section in the law. So these actions are more than just 'insulting the monarchy' but also 'undermining national security'. But we just make it easy to understand just by saying 'insulting the monarchy'.

He goes on to elaborate who is behind the conspiracy:

There are many groups. The first is those who want to advance their political interests. For example, they want to topple the government, but they think they might need to topple the other institution first. That's one example; another is people who just want a political victory. So both parties abuse the monarchy. Another group is academics who are pro a presidential system. Another group is are the socialists. They are from the communist period in the past and they still want it to be socialist way.

Another group was those who are mentally ill. For example, some people who have AIDS and are on their deathbeds, for some reason they just criticize the monarchy. Some have hallucinations, or are dreaming that some (officers) are bad, some police are threatening the civilians; therefore the institution (monarchy) has to take responsibility for that because the institution is the boss of the police. These are some examples of those who are kind of insane.

Also, some young people, who are in the news recently, wanted to rebel. Some of them were from broken families whose parents got divorced. Therefore, they wanted to be well-recognized by posting some messages on the website (insulting the monarchy), then others made positive comments about their postings. Those anti-monarchy people also sent some information to these young people, then they keep come back and post these kind of comments. After that they got compliments that they did such a great thing, therefore their incorrect notions were reinforced. They felt proud of a wrong thing. Some people were also disappointed from their business, or their political views, or family affairs. And they thought the failures were caused by the institution (monarchy). So they were insulting the monarchy.

These people have very strong ideologies, sympathize with those who share them, or they are hallucinating, or have some bias that the institution abuses the people. Some people don't think rationally. Some groups of people living overseas feel like second-class citizens there, and wanted to make a name for themselves. So they know they might be able to be the first-class citizens here in Thailand only, so they wrote or condemned the monarchy. It might derive from being depressed in the country they are living in.

Another group is terrorists who have separatist aims. But people in the 3 southernmost provinces

still pay high respect to the monarchy. But some think to achieve those separatist aims, they need to use the strategy to discredit the monarchy. Therefore, they want to insult the monarchy. These are some reasons that these people had. But 99.99 percent of people are still loyal to the monarch.

Clearly stunned, Sanyal asks him to elaborate - who are the leaders of the conspiracy and who are the operatives?

They are not like conventional gangsters who have a hierarchy – the leader of the gang, the deputy, and their team. The characteristics of this conspiracy work like this: The thought leader/ the thinker, provides leadership in terms of thought/ideology or he may be the financial supporter. These idea leaders include ideologists, academics, for example. Another group is the operatives. They are webmasters, or those who take care of the website content, or disseminate emails, host live programs, or make clips and upload them to websites, or doctor video clips, and so on. These are the operators and they need financial support. Even though they share the same ideology, they need money for the web hosting fees among other things. So, the operation cannot be completed without the ‘leaders’ or the capitalists.

Another group is the allies who have the same ideology with the mentioned groups (leaders and operatives) but have been in hiding. Some of them were disappointed/affected from other things such as politics. These people think that the institution was the cause of their problems. According to the statistics, the LM cases were not so numerous, but after the 19th September coup, the number reached a peak. These people misunderstood (that the monarchy was behind the coup) but no one corrected this misunderstanding. We have been trying to correct their thought but they failed to understand for some reasons. These masses don’t have the real leader so they believe whatever they hear. They create and distribute wrong messages that they have heard or read.

Foreigners mostly don’t understand why we are so loyal to the king. Their monarch may not do the same thing as ours. So they don’t feel much loyalty to their monarch and they can’t imagine this feeling. They have images from the movies that kings are brutal, jealous, or take some money from or tax people and live on that money. These are portrayals of the kings in foreign countries, unlike in Thailand, where the king has gone to the back country to help needy people. The king also cares about those who are less senior.

At the end of this fantastical ramble, Yanaphon emphasizes reassuringly that the Thai authorities are not just going to lock people up without evidence:

Even if we come up with something from the investigation, we need to have strong evidence to use in a court. This is our main concern – the intel needs to be converted to legal evidence. DSI has to be professional.

The hapless DSI official is clearly in the grip of an affliction that has infected a great many Thais who support the established order. They have become so used to lying and behaving as if their lies are true that they have become incapable of grasping or recognizing the truth. In particular, the military’s long

experience of impunity has caused Thailand's generals to utterly lose contact with reality - rather like the paranoid Burmese junta next door. Two recent examples clearly illustrate the madness that has overtaken the top echelons of the Royal Thai Army.

In February 2010, then-army chief General Anupong Paochinda held a news conference to insist that the GT200 explosives detectors the army had been spending the country's money to buy in large quantities were highly effective. All sane people in Thailand were well aware that this was utter nonsense. The GT200 was a scam, a useless lump of plastic with no electrical or mechanical parts which a rogue British company sold to gullible security forces around the world, usually with the help of hefty procurement bribes. Yet even after the government of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva had conducted tests which found the device completely worthless, the embarrassed Thai military refused to admit it had been duped. Overwhelming scientific evidence that the devices were totally unable to detect explosives was no reason to stop using them, Anupong insisted:

I understand the scientific tests, but what the Army is trying to say is the device operators on the ground can use them effectively. This may not be explained scientifically, but I'm telling the truth.

A long cable by Eric John laid out the sorry tale:

Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva ordered a halt to RTG procurement of the GT200 explosive detection device on February 16, after tests conducted by the Ministry of Science and Technology determined the device was ineffective. The GT200 is used throughout Thailand by many agencies, most notably in the conflict-ridden Deep South. Shortly after the PM's announcement, Royal Thai Army (RTA) Commander-in-Chief Anupong Paojinda and chief forensic investigator Khunying Pornthip Rojanasunant jumped to the device's defense, while human rights groups used the PM's announcement to highlight the questionable use of the device to detain alleged insurgents. PM Abhisit subsequently stated the GT200 should not be used against people and ordered a probe into the acquisition of the GT200 by various government agencies, a decision seen by many as being designed to help stamp out corruption in the procurement process. Commentators immediately picked up on the potential for conflict with those who might have vested interests in the continued procurement of the device...

The military brass' reluctance to abandon use of the GT200 may be a combination of concern for and by personnel faced with countering an insurgency making extensive use of IEDs that have led to dozens of soldier deaths/injuries, as well as irritation at being challenged on oversight of procurement matters. Khunying Pornthip's defense of the GT200 is more inexplicable, the latest example of her increasingly erratic judgment in recent years. The discussion of the GT200 controversy also highlighted how financing of expanded operations in the restive South has become a cash cow for a wide range of security forces and RTG agencies; many commentators also noted a parallel controversy involving the RTA's persistence in acquiring a still inoperable blimp -- officially intended for surveillance operations, but widely viewed as unsuitable for the terrain and threat in the Deep South -- at a cost of 350 million baht (approximately \$11 million).

PM Abhisit announced the government would not purchase any more of the British-made GT200 substance detection devices on February 16 after testing by the Ministry of Science and Technology found the equipment correctly identified explosives in just four of twenty attempts -- far worse than a random 50-50 flip of a coin would. Criticism of the GT200 came to a crescendo in Thailand in January when the British government banned export of the device after arresting an executive from the manufacturer of another bomb detection device on fraud charges. Abhisit also ordered an investigation into the purchase of the GT200 by various state agencies, following Thai press reports that some agencies had paid more than twice as much for the units as others...

RTA commander General Anupong and Khunying Pornthip, the director of the Institute of Forensic Science at the Ministry of Justice, led the chorus urging continued use of the GT200 in the immediate wake of Abhisit's decision. Anupong and Pornthip both insisted the GT200 was effective when used by properly trained personnel, and stated flatly that security forces -- in the Deep South in particular -- would continue to use it. Despite such unequivocal support, a bomb exploded in a market in Pattani on February 22, injuring two soldiers, immediately after troops using the GT200 had swept the area and failed to detect any explosives. That same day the Cabinet tasked the Ministry Science and Technology to go to the South and discuss discontinuing use of the GT200 with security units there, taking an additional step beyond Abhisit's suspension of further procurement...

Thai human rights activists and their political allies, including Democrat Party deputy leader/MP Kraisaak Choonhavan, have been raising the alarm about the GT200 for months, and had engaged us in mid-2009 to see if there were any way we could share US bad experience with such equipment. Kraisaak's primary concern was that innocent civilians were being detained and in some cases charged with assisting insurgent efforts solely based on GT200 readings. Thai media began questioning the effectiveness of the GT200 in Thailand's troubled southern border provinces after the device failed to detect bombs in two separate instances in October 2009, an October 6 explosion that killed one person and wounded 20 others, and an October 19 bomb that wounded 25.

To most people, the GT200 appears to be a glorified dousing rod: it claims to detect explosives at long range, powered by static electricity from the user, without any more complicated sample analysis conducted. The bomb detection squad in Yala told us that they never thought it worked, but they were ordered to use it. The squad passed the GT200 to Emboff to hold; it looked and felt like a toy. In contrast, the GT200's defenders insist the device was effective when used by properly trained personnel. Failures of the device have been explained away as a byproduct of user error; operators were too tired, sick, fatigued, or otherwise impaired to operate the device properly.

There are currently over 800 GT200 units being used in Thailand by the military, the police, the Customs Department, and the Central Institute of Forensic Science. The first purchases occurred under former PM Thaksin and continued under the interim Surayud administration and through to the current Abhisit administrations. Thai news reports indicated that some government agencies

paid 550,000 thousand baht (approx. \$16,000) apiece for the machines, while others paid up to 1.6 million baht (approx. \$48,000) per unit, with Khunying Porntip's lab paying the highest price; agencies involved claimed differing prices were due to different chips that are inserted into the GT200 to detect a variety of different substances. Both media and the political opposition have called for investigations into the procurement deals.

Criticism of the GT200 coincided with increasing public calls for the RTA to justify the purchase of a surveillance blimp which the RTA claims would be an effective tool in locating insurgents in the Deep South, but which critics say cannot accomplish the stated task given the terrain in question and the technical capabilities of the airship. The Thai media has widely reported that the blimp cost 350 million baht (approximately \$11 million); the vice-president of Arai International, the US-based company which sold the system to the RTA, wrote a letter to the editor of the Bangkok Post and said the contracted price was \$9.7 million (approx. 320 million baht). [[10BANGKOK478](#)]

Even the Bangkok Post, a staunch supporter of the establishment in recent years, [was exasperated](#) by the military's breathtaking efforts to blatantly lie to Thailand's people:

It has been officially confirmed: the GT200 is a con, a fraud, a crime. The so-called bomb detector has become the most expensive dowsing rod ever – costing the hard-working Thai taxpayer some 800 million baht. Many must have become rich from this GT200 scam. Many others must have been killed, injured, disabled, or arrested because of its inaccuracies.

Yet the military, the biggest buyer of the GT200 device, refuses to accept the facts for fear of losing face. Instead of immediately stopping its use to save lives, the military bigwigs have cold-heartedly ordered troops in the restive South to continue using the bogus device, even though tests conducted by the Science and Technology Ministry have proven beyond any doubt that the device is ineffective.

Another astonishing claim repeatedly made over the past year by the military, and new army chief Prayuth, is that - despite [firing up to 117,923 bullets including 2,500 sniper rounds](#) – the Thai army [did not kill or injure a single person](#) during its violent crackdown on Red Shirt protesters who occupied central Bangkok in April and May last year. Every single death or injury, the military claims, was the work of the shadowy Black Shirts. “I can categorically deny that the army has killed or hurt any Red Shirts or protesters, including the Japanese journalist,” [military spokesman Colonel Sansern "Kai Oo" Kaewkamnerd insisted](#). “Killing those persons would bring us no benefit whatsoever.” Leaving aside for the moment the absurdity of a military that thinks failing to hit anybody at all after firing nearly 118,000 bullets is something to boast about - most armed forces around the world would surely consider it rather embarrassing - it is abundantly clear that the generals are being a little cavalier with the truth.

Abundant video footage is available on the internet showing Thai soldiers firing live ammunition directly at civilians, not to mention compelling eyewitness testimony from ordinary Thais and from foreign reporters; this [detailed account by Nick Nostitz of events on May 15](#) is a particularly powerful example.

And besides this accumulated evidence, one episode in particular serves to undermine the official version of events: the killing of six Thai civilians including three medical workers in Wat Pathum Wanaram temple on the evening of May 19 after the military had overrun the red encampment at Ratchaprasong.

A [wealth of eyewitness testimony](#), as well as [photographic](#) and [video evidence](#) has established beyond any reasonable doubt that soldiers from the 3rd Special Warfare regiment based in Lopburi, [positioned on the elevated Skytrain railway tracks overlooking the temple](#), fired into the grounds of Wat Pathum Wanaram and were responsible for the six deaths. The combined testimony of dozens of witnesses including Red Shirts sheltering in the temple, paramedics treating the wounded, and at least three foreign journalists at Wat Pathum - [Andrew Buncombe](#) of the Independent, [Mark McKinnon](#) of Canada's Globe and Mail and [Australian photojournalist Steve Tickner](#) - describes how panicked civilians came under fire from camouflaged men who could be seen on the elevated railway. An [investigation by Thailand's Department of Special Investigation which was leaked to me last December](#) concluded that at least three of the dead were killed by special forces soldiers on the Skytrain track and contains plentiful evidence that the soldiers killed all six – the [victims were all killed by high-velocity bullets and fragments of the distinctive green-tipped M855 bullet used by the special forces troops were found in four of the six corpses](#). The report also contains the testimony of several named special forces soldiers who admitted firing from the Skytrain tracks although they denied deliberately targeting civilians. The document was also obtained by journalist Pravit Rojanaphruk at the Nation and [posted online with names redacted](#) on the Prachatai news website. Leaked DSI investigations have also shown that despite the agency's close links with powerful government politicians it has concluded that [troops were also probably responsible for several other deaths](#), including Hiro Muramoto of Reuters.

The Human Rights Watch report [Descent Into Chaos](#), published in May 2011, contains extensive evidence of egregious violence by the military as well as the Black Shirts:

The high death toll and injuries resulted from excessive and unnecessary lethal force on the part of security forces, including firing of live ammunition at protesters, sometimes by snipers. Soldiers fatally shot at least four people, including a medic treating the wounded, in or near a temple in Bangkok on May 19, despite army claims to the contrary...

During and after the protests, the government adopted various measures that seriously infringed on fundamental human rights. These included holding suspects without charge for up to 30 days in unofficial places of detention, arbitrary arrests and detentions of UDD supporters, mistreatment of detainees, and broad censorship of critical media and websites.

Contentious key issues, such as the role of the monarchy and military in Thai politics and society, a dysfunctional and catalysts for the protests. These have yet to be addressed in any meaningful way. Moreover, while several protest leaders and many UDD rank-and-file have been charged with serious criminal offenses and are awaiting prosecution, government forces implicated in abuses continue to enjoy impunity, sending Thais the message that the scales of justice are imbalanced, if not entirely broken. It is critical for the government to ensure impartial and transparent government investigations that lead to criminal prosecutions against those on all sides responsible for abuses, including those who ordered the unlawful use of force or incited violence.

Impunity and human rights abuses have long been a feature of Thailand's political system and culture. [Human Rights Watch, *Descent Into Chaos*]

On April 10, in [fighting](#) around the [Khok Wua junction](#) and the Phan Fa bridge, 26 people were killed: five soldiers including Colonel Romklao Thuwatham, a rising military star and deputy chief of staff of the Queen's Guard, and 20 civilians including [my colleague Hiro Muramoto](#), a Reuters cameraman from Japan who was [shot dead as he filmed the unrest](#).

Military spokesperson Col. Sansern Kaewkamnerd continued to deny throughout the day that the army had used live ammunition, saying, "Rumors have it troops used live ammunition— this is untrue." But video of the clashes that Human Rights Watch examined shows live ammunition being fired in semi-automatic mode, protesters collecting bullet casings and rounds from the ground, and many protesters apparently suffering from bullet wounds.⁸¹ Human Rights Watch has obtained photographs showing that assault rifle magazines that soldiers used on April 10 were loaded with live, green-tipped 5.56mm ball M855 ammunition...

According to autopsy reports, most of the dead on both sides were killed by high-velocity rounds presumably fired from assault rifles. Human Rights Watch found that high velocity rounds were fired by both the security forces and Black Shirts, while some of the Red Shirt protesters and Red Shirt Guard used pistols during the clashes. Among the dead were Reuters TV cameraman Hiroyuki Muramoto, 43, who was killed by a high velocity bullet to his chest. [Human Rights Watch, *Descent Into Chaos*]

In mid-May, serious violence flared again on the streets of Bangkok. Particularly troubling - and not just because of the military's [inability to spell](#) simple English-language phrases - was the army's designation of some areas as ["life fire zones"](#):

On May 14, the government set out new rules of engagement for security forces, allowing them to use live fire under specific circumstances. These included using warning shots for self-defense, and when troops had clear visual site of "terrorists," a dangerously vague term. In practice, the security forces began deploying snipers to shoot anyone who tried to enter "no-go" zones between the UDD and security force barricades, or who threw projectiles towards soldiers. On many occasions, security forces appear to have randomly shot into crowds of UDD supporters who posed no threat to them, often with lethal consequences.

While Thai authorities have not released comprehensive forensic analyses of the wounds sustained by those killed between May 14 and May 18, incidents reviewed by Human Rights Watch indicate that several unarmed protesters were killed with single shots to the head, suggesting the use of snipers and high-powered scopes. For example, a photographer who was filming a wounded protester in Lumpini Park on the morning of May 14 and found himself under heavy gunfire said: "I didn't see any armed people getting shot. What you had were snipers with scopes taking people out with headshots, people who at most had a slingshot."...

Video footage and eyewitness accounts show the army frequently fired into crowds of unarmed protesters, often wounding and killing several. Nelson Rand, a foreign journalist, described to Human Rights Watch how he was repeatedly shot as he tried to cross the street near Lumpini Park to reach a second group of Red Shirt protesters:

I first was filming with the army on Wireless Road, close to the Lumpini police station. Then I ran across to the Red Shirt side. I was near the Lumpini police station. I wanted to cross the street because there was another group of Red Shirts there as well. As I ran across the street, I was shot in my wrist. I kept running and ended up beside another person who was shot and he was waving a white towel. As I got down, I was shot again in the leg. I was screaming for help. I didn't see any armed people around there amongst the Reds. All the shots were coming from the army, as far as I know. A Red Shirt security guard ran across the street and grabbed me by the arm, he later told me I was shot again in the side as he was dragging me but I had lost consciousness by then.

On May 15, protesters in the Rang Nam, Bon Kai, and Klong Toey neighborhoods tried to set up new barricades to widen the area under UDD control, and met deadly gunfire as army soldiers frequently firing with live bullets towards the protesters.¹⁶⁵ One medic wearing a red helmet was shot dead with a gunshot wound to the head.¹⁶⁶ Journalists and photographers, wearing clearly marked "press" signs, were wounded after they came under fire while reporting the situation in those areas.

On May 19, the military launched the final assault on the red encampment. Anthony Davis, an analyst for *Jane's Intelligence Review* who was with the Thai troops, told Human Rights Watch the operation was "staggering in its incompetence":

A foreign military analyst who accompanied the soldiers during the assault said he was stunned by the poor standard of the military operation:

The whole operation was staggering in its incompetence. You had scared young conscripts blazing away at the tents in Lumpini Park without any fire control. There wasn't the command and control that you would expect during such an operation. There were two main operations, the movement up the road and the operation to clear the park. They were totally uncoordinated. When I was with the troops in the park along the fence, they were opening fire at people in the park, including on the other military unit that was inside the park. You had incipient "friendly fire" incidents. The park was used essentially as a free-fire zone, the soldiers moved and took shots along Wireless and Rama IV Road.

At least two young men were shot dead by soldiers as they took control of the Saladaeng UDD barricades...

UDD leadership - claiming it was acting to save protesters' lives - unexpectedly surrendered during an army operation to retake areas around the Ratchaprasong camp. As UDD leaders were taken into custody, most unarmed UDD supporters left the area. Security forces fired directly into

the UDD barricades with live ammunition, causing deaths and injuries among protesters, medic volunteers, and bystanders. Small groups of armed militants fired assault weapons and grenades at advancing soldiers, causing deaths and injuries, but quickly abandoned the battle...

Several thousand UDD demonstrators sought sanctuary in the compound of a Buddhist temple, Wat Pathum Wanaram, which had been declared a safe zone several days earlier in an agreement between the government and UDD leaders. Fresh violence led to the deaths of six people in or near the compound. The army, which denied any responsibility for the killings inside the temple, suggested the six fatalities were due to an internal Red Shirt dispute. A Human Rights Watch investigation, based on eyewitness accounts and forensic evidence, found that soldiers fatally shot at least two people outside the temple entrance as they fled, while soldiers on the elevated train tracks shot and wounded others (at least fatally) inside the temple compound. Narongsak Singmae, a UDD protester who was shot and wounded inside the temple said:

[O]ur leaders told us that temple was a safe zone. I brought along my wife and my son.... Around 6 p.m. I heard gunshots coming from in front of the temple and I saw people running toward me.... Before I could do anything, I was shot in my left leg and in my chest. The bullet went through my leg. But luckily, the bullet that hit my chest was stopped by a coin in my bag. Soldiers shot wildly at anyone that moved. I saw another two men shot by soldiers as they tried to come out from their hiding places and run for safety.

According to witnesses, medic volunteers who were tending the wounded inside the temple compound were amongst those killed. These included a nurse who was shot while tending to a wounded man near the nursing station at the front of the temple, and 22-year-old man who was fatally shot in the head and body inside the medical tent after providing first aid to the nurse. Witnesses told Human Rights Watch that soldiers did not allow medics and ambulances to rescue wounded protesters, possibly causing additional deaths:

I believed many people died because medics and ambulances were not allowed to enter Wat Pathum until almost midnight. I saw a young man suffer from gunshot wounds for about 45 minutes before he died. Some of us tried to crawl out from our hiding places to help the wounded and retrieve dead bodies, but we were shot at by soldiers. [Human Rights Watch, *Descent Into Chaos*]

Quite clearly, in parallel with the Red Shirt protests in April and May 2010, groups of armed men with links to some of the Red leadership - and possibly others without any direct links who may have been factions of the military opposed to the Eastern Tigers who are believed to be very closely linked to Queen Sirikit - repeatedly fought skirmishes with Thai soldiers. If the Thai military had explained that during these engagements they had killed opposing fighters - and possibly, by mistake, in the heat of the battle, some civilians - many Thais would have accepted and understood this. But the bizarre claim that the military was not responsible for any of the casualties is not only unsustainable, it casts doubt over all other elements of the official narrative, and shows the military's incredible arrogance. The fact that Prayuth and his allies really believe they can sell this lie to the Thai people shows the effect of decades of

impunity and the military's use of the lèse majesté to abuse Thai reverence for the monarchy and hide the truth:

In contemporary Thai political and social discourse, there is in fact a difficulty in accepting, recognizing, acknowledging, or acting upon truth...

The long-term effects of impunity, military rule, and the principles of the defamation regime on Thailand's perception of truth should not be underestimated. [Streckfuss, *Truth on Trial*]

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The truth is that there is no evidence whatsoever of any organized republican conspiracy against King Bhumibol and the Thai monarchy.

On the contrary, the modern monarchy is under threat because the military and bureaucracy have for decades used the palace to legitimize an increasingly unsustainable political status quo based on myths that cannot stand up to scrutiny. As Thailand enters the 21st century with its citizens better educated and better informed than they have ever been in history, more and more people are quite naturally questioning the fables underpinning the official narrative, and more and more people are demanding openness, accountability and a greater voice in politics. Rather than adapt to accommodate this inevitable - and positive - pressure for change, Thailand's ruling elites are unable to find any better response than paranoia and repression. But they cannot win. It is inevitable that, sooner or later, the archaic power structure still in place in Thailand and the fairy tales invented to sustain it will be swept away. The only question is whether this happens through an inclusive and peaceful process of evolution or through destructive and violent revolution.

The looming death of Bhumibol has made the crisis even more dangerously acute. Popular reverence and love for Rama IX is the magical ingredient that has induced Thailand's people to suspend their disbelief and put their faith in the fairy tale. Many Thais are quite rightly deeply suspicious of the actions and motives of the ruling elite and the military, but believe that as long as the wise and virtuous Bhumibol approves of them, then everything must be alright. When he goes, the glue holding the whole increasingly unstable edifice together will dissolve.

Thailand's ruling elites are well aware of this. Their dilemma is that, as Eric John wrote in 2008:

For the royalist segment of the Bangkok-based political class... there is no clear path to perpetuating the monarchy's preeminence after the King's death. [08BANGKOK1293]

Panicked and paranoid, and not knowing what else to do, they are using the lèse majesté law as their main weapon in a futile campaign of repression to try to [turn back the tide](#)..

The obvious answer to the question of the incessant calls to Thai unity is that there is an understanding, at some level, that no such unity ever existed and that even the appearance of unity has come at a terrible cost. Defamation laws mask the fissures and cracks in this unity...

The cleavages in Thai society - class, race, ethnic, religious, regional and political - so long papered over and held together by incessant calls for unity and a century-old construction of an ossified national identity, are no longer deniable or manageable. The linchpin is the *lèse majesté* law. The law's use does not indicate the strength of the Thai state but rather its utter desperation. [Streckfuss, *Truth on Trial*]

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The likely outcome of this strategy is that, by seeking to survive through brutality and repression rather than inclusivity and evolution, the royalist establishment ends up destroying the monarchy it claims to be fighting to defend:

Thailand may continue to allow *lèse majesté* and other defamation-based laws to consume everything, at the probable cost, in the end, of the monarchy itself. By creating narrowly understood demands of authoritarian loyalty, the ultimate end of defamation-based laws is not loyalty or love, but intolerance, violence and destruction. Those who wield these laws bring destruction to democracy, narrow the public sphere, and create a precarious and fragile unity born of repression. The effects of defamation-based laws on the perception of truth have been devastating. These laws obscure truth, scar the past, result in endless accusations and counter-accusations of treason, and divide society into categories of patriots and enemies. This is one possible end to this history. [Streckfuss, *Truth on Trial*]

Tragically, it appears Thailand's archaic elites have yet to understand this. As Eric John wrote in 2009:

Several private Americans with long-term experience in Thailand and good connections with palace insiders weighed in "as friends" February 3-5 out of concern that the increased application of lese majeste, without distinction between those who mean ill towards the monarchy and those who otherwise would be ignored, ran the risk of undermining the very institution the law seeks to protect, and which they feel has served Thailand well through the decades. The reception to the message was mixed. Privy Councilors Prem Tinsulanonda, Surayud Chulanont, and Siddhi Savetsila thanked one U.S. businessman for the "very good advice; we'll take it seriously." The reaction from the Crown Property Bureau to a similar approach by a second businessman was completely negative; the self-described friend of the monarchy remarked afterwards: "these people live in an alternate reality." [[09BANGKOK325](#)]

V. “POWERFUL GIANT WITH SAVAGE POWER”

On September 19, 2005, Thaksin Shinawatra, at the height of his political power, met U.S. President George W. Bush in the Oval Office at the White House. Bush called Thaksin “a good friend and a very thoughtful leader”:

The Prime Minister is a person who believes in markets and free enterprise and freedom. And I'm really, really pleased he's here... Finally, I do want to thank the Prime Minister and His Majesty for sending relief supplies to our folks that have been affected by Hurricane Katrina. This good country has just come through a tsunami, and they're on their way to recovery. And yet they were able to, through their -- because of their generous hearts, ship help. And so thanks very much, and please thank His Majesty for his generous contribution to the folks down there.

Ahead of the visit, Alexander Arvizu, the U.S. charge d'affaires in Bangkok, cabled Washington to brief officials about Thailand's billionaire prime minister.

Prime Minister Thaksin dominates politics in a way never before seen in Thailand. His Thai Rak Thai (Thais Love Thais) political party holds 377 of the 500 elected seats in Parliament. His Cabinet Ministers are beholden to him for their positions and tend not to make major decisions -- or often even minor ones -- without Thaksin's express approval. A successful businessman, Thaksin turned his family's company, Shinawatra Corporation, into the largest telecommunications concern in Southeast Asia, making himself a billionaire in the process. His grasp of modern public relations was evident in both of his national election campaigns where he presented a polished, telegenic image to the electorate and ran on a platform that promised a twenty-first century economy coupled with a social welfare program that included virtually free health care and development grants to the nation's villages. (The majority of the Thai population still resides in rural areas.) Thaksin's power base, as a result, includes the captains of Thai industry, many business owners, and poor rural voters. Opposition Democratic Party leaders are in disarray, working to rebuild from their crushing defeat at the polls in February their support areas are now pretty much relegated to the party's traditional strongholds in the south and among the intelligentsia in the capital. Thaksin displayed an iron hand in imposing discipline within his party in June when he beat back an attempt by the Democrats to censure the former Transport Minister for corruption and, in so doing, made clear that he would crush any Thai Rak Thai member or faction that supported the censure motion.

With justification, critics accuse Thaksin of having little tolerance for dissenting views. Critics also point out that Thaksin has curbed press freedom and filled key government positions (including in the military) with family members, Armed Forces Academy Prep School classmates and other confidants, often seemingly regardless of qualifications. Supremely self-confident, he frequently makes snap decisions and rarely second-guesses himself. In July, he pushed through the Cabinet an Emergency Decree in response to the ongoing violence in southern Thailand. The sweeping measure has been roundly criticized by activists and scholars as giving security forces a virtual "license to kill" in the Muslim south (although the edict seems to be popular with the Thai

public outside of the south and has yet to be enforced, in any case).

A graduate of the Thai National Police Academy, Thaksin also holds a master's degree in Criminal Justice from Eastern Kentucky University and a Ph.D. in Criminology from Sam Houston State. With American visitors, he jokingly refers to himself as an "honorary Texan." Speaking colloquial if heavily accented English, he is comfortable in the presence of Americans...

Thaksin also views himself as the man most qualified to lead ASEAN in the coming years. He believes he has become a more important player on the global stage and, like other national leaders, responds favorably to suggestions or proposals pitched personally by prominent leaders such as Vladimir Putin or Hu Jintao...

Thaksin's preeminent policy concern is how to respond to the unrest in southern Thailand. The current violence is caused by separatist activity mixed with unfocused violence by disaffected Muslims and criminal activity. All of this, together with an often heavy-handed response by security forces, has led to approximately 800 deaths since early 2004. The ongoing violence has historic roots going back a century and is aimed at driving Thai Buddhists out of the region. While we are not aware of direct evidence of links between Thai separatists and outside terrorist groups, we are concerned that trans-national terrorist groups might attempt to take advantage of the situation. Thaksin's policy missteps over time clearly have exacerbated the violence...

Under Thaksin, Thailand has maintained a strategy of engagement with Burma. Pointing to the 1,400 mile long border the two countries share, Thaksin tells Americans that he has little choice but to engage the regime in Rangoon in order to address narcotics trafficking, refugees, and trafficking in Persons. He maintains that Thailand does press Burma behind-the-scenes. Thaksin often likens Thailand's problem with illegal Burmese immigrants to America's concern with illegal workers from Mexico. Recently, we have detected some positive movement from Thaksin on Burma. He told Secretary Rice in July that if the regime did not take some positive steps soon, he would be willing to call more openly for political progress. We suggest that the President call him on this pledge...

Thaksin maintains excellent relations with China. He went to Beijing in July and will meet PRC Vice Premier Wu Yi in September upon his return from Washington. Thai government and economic leaders subscribe to the maxim that "a rich China will lead to a prosperous Asia" and encourage further expansion of trade links between the two countries building on a limited FTA covering some agricultural goods. Thaksin is dismissive of suggestions that Taiwan and the Mainland might someday come to blows, citing the PRC's paramount desire not to disturb economic growth. PRC state-run media and cultural centers saturate the Thai market, reaching not only the 15 percent of Thai who are ethnic Chinese, but a growing number of the population in general. Although the Thai military tends to have far more links with Americans than with Chinese, PLA ties with the Thai military are on the upswing through bargain-priced arms sales, officer exchange programs, and offers to hold joint exercises. Some Thai analysts are concerned that their leaders are too nonchalant about possible friction points Bangkok might have with Beijing in the future and call for greater discussions about China between Thai and U.S.

representatives...

Thaksin is eager to make a good impression in Washington and wants to show his constituencies that he is close to the President. He has been personally involved in Thailand's offers of assistance to those affected by Hurricane Katrina. Thaksin's personal involvement is essential to advance a number of key U.S. objectives and address our concerns, including terrorism, the violence in southern Thailand, Burma, PSI, an FTA, an Open Skies Agreement, and F-16s.

[05BANGKOK5791]

A month after the Oval Office meeting, U.S. ambassador Boyce cabled an appraisal of the state of democracy in Thailand:

Thailand is the most democratic country in the neighborhood, with a lively press and fiercely competed elections. Thailand's remarkable political development, after a long period of military rule, progressed in tandem with its impressive economic development, which gave its citizens greater access to education and mass media, reinforcing the transition to democracy. In 1997, Thailand adopted a new constitution, meant to consolidate yet further the country's democratic progress.

Things have not gone quite as expected. The 1997 Asian financial crisis discredited the Democrat Party in power during the initial recovery stages, and left the population uncertain and eager for a strong leader. Thaksin Shinawatra and his Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party took advantage of the opening, winning a commanding majority in the 2001 elections and an even larger one in 2005. Thaksin is the strongest Prime Minister in Thai history -- the only one, in fact, to serve out his full term and be re-elected. One of the goals of the 1997 Constitution was to build a more stable parliamentary system and stronger political parties by making it more difficult for MPs to jockey for political advantage by changing party affiliation. Thaksin has cleverly used these provisions to increase the cohesion and clout of TRT and expand his personal power. Thaksin also built his personal stature with populist programs, like cheap credit and cheap medical care, that won the enthusiastic support of the poorer voters, especially in the rural areas. Thailand's opposition parties and NGOs have never come up against anything quite like Thaksin, and they are playing political catch-up. Thailand remains a democracy, but one in which the balance among the political and social forces is unhealthy. [05BANGKOK6524]

Among the key areas of concern, Boyce noted the following:

- Media Freedom. Thailand still has some of the most lively and vibrant media in the region, but it is being constricted. The government's use of libel suits and the purchase of media outlets by 'Friends of Thaksin' have limited the public's access to independent news. The government is attempting to shut down many community radio stations on weak, technical pretexts. Journalists have questionable ethics and sensationalize stories to sell papers.
- Muslim unrest. In the South, the government lacks a smart policy to combat anti-government violence, insurgency and separatism. Society lacks mechanisms to promote reconciliation and

ethnic harmony. The security problem in the South is a threat to democracy around the country, as the government uses terrorism as an excuse for "emergency" regulations that could limit individual freedoms, especially press freedom. Security forces are implicated in human rights abuses.

-- Rule of law/law enforcement/transparency. Weak corporate governance and transparency regulations foster money politics and corrupt the political system. The poor performance by police, due both to lack of training and lack of motivation, contributes to human rights abuses. The security forces are hampered by poor coordination and interagency distrust. In the South, the lack of access to justice is one of the key elements feeding anti-government feeling.

-- Voter education/election monitoring. Given the lack of opposition access to broadcast media, voters may have limited information about their choices, or about criticisms of the conduct of the elections. Vote buying and, in some areas voter intimidation, still occur.

-- Weak institutions. The 1997 Constitution calls for a range of independent institutions, starting with a non-partisan Senate and including agencies to combat corruption, oversee media, etc. These new institutions are still too weak to accomplish their goals. In some cases, the Senate has moved too slowly to establish these agencies; in other cases, the government has effectively blocked the work of agencies that might limit its power, or co-opted them. The Senators are not the independent "wise men" foreseen in the constitution; most are partisan, with the TRT faction dominant.

Overall, despite clear deficiencies in democracy, Thailand was a beacon of progress in a region where dictatorship and authoritarianism remained the norm:

The US and Thailand enjoy an excellent relationship. We have long and close ties to most sectors in Thai society, from the political leaders of all parties, through the military and up to the royal family. Thais and Americans are connected by family ties, alumni associations, business interests: we do not believe that there will be long-term negative consequences to our efforts to support democracy here. In the short term, we must recognize that the current Prime Minister is famously sensitive to criticism and quick to use nationalist and populist messages to build support for his positions. Even though his soaring popularity has sagged somewhat recently, he remains genuinely popular and effective at using his office to rally support. Efforts based on confrontation and direct public criticism of the PM and his policies are unlikely, in our view, to be as effective as those that build on the genuine progress Thailand's other institutions have steadily built in recent years. [05BANGKOK6524]

But on September 19, 2006, exactly a year after Thaksin's White House meeting with Bush, the Thai army's tanks were rolling through the streets of Bangkok. The military toppled Thaksin, who was back in the United States, to attend the UN General Assembly. Thailand's generals had once again taken control of the country.

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Thaksin Shinawatra was born in 1949 in Chiang Mai, northern Thailand. He was an officer in the Royal

Thai Police, before making billions with his Shin Corp conglomerate - helped, it is [widely alleged](#), by a tip-off by then-Finance Minister Thanong Bidaya about the imminent devaluation of the baht currency in 1997 that bankrupted many businesses. As his wealth multiplied, Thaksin's political ambitions grew. In the 1990s he joined the Palang Dharma party of ascetic former General Chamlong Srimuang - later to become a sworn enemy - and served brief spells as foreign minister in 2004/5 and deputy prime minister in 2005/6 and again in 2007. After he took over the leadership of Palang Dharma from Chamlong, the party swiftly imploded. Thaksin founded a new political party: Thai Rak Thai. The name he chose for his political vehicle (it means "Thais Love Thais") seems particularly ironic in view of the bitter divisions in Thai society exacerbated by Thaksin's meteoric political ascent and his subsequent fall from grace.

Thai Rak Thai stormed to power in early 2001 thanks to a populist policy platform and savvy marketing skills that outclassed and bewildered the hidebound politicians of other parties; the Democrat Party was trounced and limped home a distant second. The early months of his premiership were dominated by a looming Constitutional Court decision on whether Thailand's new prime minister should be barred from politics for concealing the extent of his past wealth [full disclosure: I had a run-in with Thaksin during this period when he objected to an article I wrote and boasted on television that he would come to the Reuters office to beat me up; the [full story is here](#)]. Although it was plainly apparent to everyone that Thaksin had indeed tried to hide some of his assets, the judges spared him in a cliffhanger 8-7 vote. And in his first term in office, he went from strength to strength. Even policies that were later to be used by his enemies to discredit him - in particular his 2003 "war on drugs" in which hundreds of alleged narcotics dealers were murdered in extrajudicial killings in an effort to halt the scourge of metamphetamine abuse - were extremely popular and broadly applauded by all sections of society at the time. Thaksin became the first ever elected prime minister in Thai history to serve a full four-year term in office - petty coalition squabbles or coups had ended every previous premiership prematurely - and in general elections in February 2005 he scored two more landmark achievements - the first prime minister reelected for a second consecutive term, with Thai Rak Thai winning an outright majority at the polls, another first.

The Democrat Party was, once again, thrashed. Basking in his triumph, Thaksin was unusually conciliatory in his victory speech:

Flush with the apparent magnitude of his victory (earlier he had predicted "not a landslide - an avalanche"), Thaksin has sounded a conciliatory note. In an attempt to reassure his critics, Thaksin said on February 6 that "four years from now, my critics in academia and the opposition will know me better. They'll realize that I really had good intentions for the country." Thaksin now appears to have the mandate to define what is good. Though the counting continues, to all appearances he has virtual legislative carte blanche to push through his programs. Ironically, the "stability" that Thaksin is celebrating looks to his critics suspiciously like the end of real political diversity in Thailand. Obviously that is not true. The opposition still has a voice in and out of Parliament, the Thai media is not stifled (despite some legitimate concerns), and there is a sitting "watchdog" Senate and active civil society. That said, the Thai electorate has given a clear sign to Thaksin that he will interpret as a mandate for his policies and satisfaction with where he has taken the country over the past four years. [[05BANGKOK980](#)]

At the end of March, new U.S. ambassador “Skip” Boyce wrote a detailed assessment of “the Thaksinization of Thailand”:

After six and a half years away and three months back, this seems as good a time as any to review the landscape in Thaksin Shinawatra’s Thailand. For starters, there is the towering figure of the Prime Minister himself. Dominating the scene as no previous civilian leader has ever done, Thaksin’s influence is everywhere. The Bangkok elite, which embraced him as the next new thing four years ago, has grown scornful of him, but he actually revels in thumbing his nose at the capital’s chattering classes. Himself a self-made man from the provinces (according to his myth makers), he has successfully tapped into the aspirations of Thailand’s millions. And unlike previous regimes that rode into power by buying the loyalties of the rural areas, Thaksin has also won over the millions of Bangkok residents who are not from the traditional elite - the mom and pop shopkeepers, the taxi drivers, the food stall vendors, department store salespeople and the day laborers. In 2001, for the first time in history, Bangkok voted along with the north, the northeast and the central plains. In 2005, this phenomenon actually grew stronger, as Thaksin’s machine swept 32 of Bangkok’s 35 seats. (The south... was a significant and problematic exception.) In the country as a whole, Thai Rak Thai’s (TRT) grip on 377 of Parliament’s 500 seats is an unprecedented feat for a single party.

ONE-PARTY RULE?

But is this really “one-party rule,” as the newspapers love to shriek? A look at the 377 seats shows that Thaksin is actually atop what amounts to a four- or five-party coalition, i.e., more in line with recent Thai political experience. Leaving aside the 67 party list members who were elected on a national slate, a break out of the 310 constituency seats reveals the following: 165 previous TRT members, 46 from three defunct parties (Seritham-12, New Aspiration Party-17, and Chart Pattana-17) that merged with TRT, 21 defectors from other parties (Chart Thai-12, Rassadorn-1, and Democrat Party-5), 11 pre-2001 MPs and more than 40 “inheritances,” i.e., sons and daughters of MPs from feudal-like constituencies. In putting together his cabinet this time around, Thaksin had to juggle and placate the various factions just as Prem Tinsulanonda or Chatchai Choonhavan used to have to do repeatedly with their unwieldy coalitions.

That said, Thaksin has significantly altered the Thai political scene, possibly forever (or at least as long as he is around). In the 2001 and 2005 elections, he and his party campaigned on issues and promises (affordable health care, village loans), and then essentially delivered the goods. Today Thailand basically has a two-party system, with Thaksin having run the most recent campaign as a referendum on him, a referendum that he most definitely won. The opposition is in disarray, with the Democrats having been reduced to a weak, regional party and the rest of the rabble having almost disappeared (or been absorbed by Thaksin’s juggernaut). Thaksin accomplished this by mastering the reforms of the liberal 1997 constitution, which altered the electoral mechanics from three-member constituencies to the party list/single member format. In power, he took full advantage of the new charter’s creation of a strong executive, while distorting, dismantling or delaying the new “watchdog” institutions that were supposed to check

and balance that new executive power.

"CEO" MANAGEMENT AND THE CABINET

Now Thaksin has a second term and a new cabinet with 29 of the 35 ministers reshuffled from the previous slate. This is probably a good place to note that Thaksin's vaunted "CEO style of management" differs markedly from the model which would have the company listed on the stock exchange, shares traded on the market, stockholders to placate and a board of directors to be responsive to. No, Thaksin's style is much more like the family-owned private company where the CEO speaks and the lieutenants carry out his will - much like, say, Shinawatra Corporation used to be while Thaksin was making his billions, or dozens of other Thai conglomerates.

And now he runs his cabinet just like that. Among the 35 ministers are Thanong Bidaya, Thaksin's former banker (and widely rumored to have tipped Thaksin off about the coming baht devaluation when Thanong was Finance Minister in 1997), four former aides, six business friends, one police classmate, one family doctor and only eight MPs. Thaksin today has ably positioned himself to be the only star in the political constellation and could thus well be around for the next eight years or more.

That is, unless he stumbles. Analysts have been predicting another debt-driven economic crisis since the day he put his rural lending scheme into effect and everyone upcountry suddenly had a cell phone and a pickup truck. Or the south could erupt... Or, simply, the Thai people could exercise their penchant to tire of the same old thing and go for the next new thing. For the moment, however, there is no other thing than the Thaksin thing.

TENSIONS WITH THE PALACE

Except maybe the King. In the age of Thaksin, the King has on several occasions made public his differences with Thaksin's style and more importantly, his philosophy. As respected former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun puts it, Thaksinomics teaches that it is OK to be greedy and that money fixes everything. The King's idea is somewhat different and has been neatly summarized in a short pamphlet called, "What is Sufficiency, Economy?" This pamphlet draws on royal utterances over the past 25 years and essentially calls for a rural-based model of sustainable development. Of late, the pamphlet is being flogged by Privy Councillors, the head of the Crown Property Bureau, and noteworthy columnists as the antidote to Thaksinomics.

In addition, Bangkok observers have been aghast at what they perceive as Thaksin's unwillingness to be appropriately obeisant to His Majesty. In the recent campaign, they claim, he swanned about upcountry as though he were the sovereign of the country. He is visibly impatient with the many royal ceremonies he has to sit through where he is not the center of attention. In this year's Mahidol Awards, he fussed and fretted in his seat while the King spoke softly to the American and German doctors who were being honored.

But the King will not be around forever, and Thaksin long ago invested in Crown Prince futures.

Nevertheless, the debate over Thailand's direction has been joined, with the outcome still in question.

CORRUPTION

Thaksin is very rich. According to Forbes, after distributing some of his assets to his children, the PM is the third richest man in Thailand (after Charoen Sirivadhanabhakdi, Chairman, TCC Group, who owns Chang beer and has extensive real estate and hotel holdings, and Chalio Yuwittaya, who produces and sells the "Red Bull" energy drink). Does Thaksin really need to make more money? Or do people just unfairly and lazily ascribe every thing he does to an ulterior profit-making motive? Every indicator seems to suggest the adage that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Thaksin, his family and his business and political allies have made immense profits in the past four years and seem on track to continue doing so. Is it something in the entrepreneur's gene pool that cannot switch off the quest for more, better, greater, now, now, now? There are nuances to understand, but in all aspects of public life (Burma policy and the current follow-on jet fighter acquisition deal come to mind), a good case can be made that business or political considerations are *uber alles*.

Recall that Thaksin was driven out of the Foreign Ministerial portfolio in 1994 because he refused to make public his assets. Recall that he entered his Prime Ministry in 2001 under a cloud when he finally grudgingly gave up control of his wealth - and even then only to his wife, children and, in one memorable instance, his servants. In any event, if corruption has indeed reached historic proportions, as many claim, the people seem willing to tolerate it as long as the rising tide lifts all boats...

A NEW FOREIGN POLICY PARADIGM

Thai traditional foreign policy style has been understated, subtle, even graceful, and widely lauded within ASEAN as among the most professional. Together with Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia, Thailand has helped define the "ASEAN way" over the years. Eschewing conflict, always seeking that elusive "consensus," keeping problems behind closed doors - this was the formula within ASEAN for decades. But notably, under Thaksin, Thai foreign policy style has been most un-ASEAN, and even un-Thai. Today, with Thaksin often in the lead, Thailand is much more unilateralist and often prone to practice megaphone diplomacy in place of quiet persuasion...

The tsunami conference was a recent example, but in general Thailand's relations with Malaysia and Indonesia over the south have taken on a shrillness not frequently seen among these founding members of ASEAN. In Burma policy, the Thai effort to come up with a "Bangkok Process" to give them cover to pursue largely their own narrow interests in Burma has collapsed. It is telling that the lead efforts in recent weeks on the problem of Burma rotating into the 2006 ASEAN Chair have come from Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia rather than from the Thai.

And then there is China. Some are concerned about Chinese inroads into Thailand and indeed the

region as a whole. The Thaksin government seems to be embracing the Chinese wholeheartedly. Thailand is being portrayed as the gateway to China. Is this a concern for the U.S.? With the benefit of three months, reflection, it seems to be less of a zero-sum game than might appear. The Chinese are indisputably very active. Yes, they have better tailors and speak better English. Yes, they are very close with the largely Sino-Thai crowd that dominates the Thaksin government. But is every Chinese gain necessarily at our expense? It seems to be more a return to traditional patterns in the region over hundreds if not thousands of years. This is China's neighborhood, and while they were out of the picture for fifty years after the end of World War II (precisely the period when U.S. presence was paramount), they are back, and they are bringing the A team. For reasons of geography, we cannot realistically match the Chinese visit-for-visit. But we are capable of directing more high-level attention to the region, and we should.

THE SOUTH - A YEAR OF MISSTEPS

The past twelve months have brought a series of increasingly serious developments in the three southernmost Muslim-majority provinces. In January 2004 the armory was raided. In April the Krue Se mosque incident raised the level of violence and government response to new proportions. Increasingly violent protest was met with more and more force. Last October, the horrific Tak Bai event saw 78 prisoners suffocate while in police custody, after which the Prime Minister most unhelpfully suggested that the prisoners had died because they were "weak from fasting" in the holy month of Ramadan! The February election was a debacle for TRT in the three provinces, as the party lost all but one seat. Still the hard-line approach continued, with Thaksin unveiling his plan to withhold all government funds for districts judged to be problematic. Indeed, Thaksin and many of his hard-line supporters around the country view the election outcome in the South as vindication of the government's policies.

The south is not a new problem. Some point to Thaksin's 2001 disbanding of a joint military-police-civilian task force (at the urging of his fellow policemen) as the root of the problem, but in fact its origins go back a hundred years, to the very incorporation of these ethnically and religiously different areas into the Siamese Kingdom. The Thai have yet to make a concerted effort to understand the culture and values of the Muslim south, a fact which has only compounded Muslim sensitivities in general since the onset of the global war on terror. It is high time that this neglectful, superior attitude changed...

THAILAND STANDS UP

There are plenty of areas where Thaksin deserves credit. The tsunami disaster was generally well handled, turning a national calamity into an opportunity to demonstrate that Thailand can take care of itself. Moreover, the fact that the relief effort was centered out of Thailand was greeted in the region without dissent. The image was of an emerging leader helping weaker states in the neighborhood like Indonesia and Sri Lanka...

And however Thailand's quixotic campaign to put now-former Foreign Minister Surakiart in the UN Secretary General's job ends up, if nothing else it is further demonstration the Thailand

desires to play more of a global role. Bangkok is a much more livable city today than it was twenty years ago, traffic is manageable, the air is cleaner, the airport is first-class, the Thai smile is still charming and as a result the country is legitimately challenging Singapore and Hong Kong as a regional business hub. That is a good thing, it started before Thaksin rose to power, and it is a trend we should encourage.

THE BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP

In Indonesia, everything we do charts new territory and defines our relationship with a country that is literally reinventing itself from soup to nuts. In Thailand, we have a mature, deep-seated, historic friendship with a stable, sophisticated partner. The scars of the 1997 financial crisis (when the U.S. was widely perceived as having failed Thailand in its hour of need) linger, but not with Thaksin. He very much sees the past as past, and is focused much more on the here and now, and prospects for the future. He studied in the U.S., and likes our business model. All of this is very good for us...

In general... we continue to enjoy huge advantages in Thailand that few other countries can rival. The fact that the Embassy is among our largest in the world, and growing, is testament to this. The real challenge for us, and increasingly for the Thai, is to resist relying too much on the mantra of the "historic relationship." Instead, we need to bring this important partnership into the 21st Century, and channel our long-standing influence in positive directions, including the further consolidation of democratic institutions in Thailand. Despite the unprecedented concentration of political power recently under Thaksin, civil society continues to develop in a healthy, Thai way. Thaksin's style is to push the envelope, but democracy in Thailand is more resilient than his critics, Thai and foreign, are willing to acknowledge. Here in Thailand, we can have our cake and eat it too -- by mixing classic "realpolitik" (which Thaksin understands and responds well to) with principled interventions when the need arises. [05BANGKOK2219]

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While Thailand's generals deserve the biggest share of the blame for persistently undermining democracy throughout the country's modern history, elected politicians have done plenty of damage too. The vast majority of politicians have never considered their job to involve serving the country or helping formulate coherent policies. Instead, they have traditionally spent their time making use of their position to accumulate as much wealth as possible for themselves, their family and their friends. Political parties had little ideology or vision: politicians chose the party they belonged to purely based on its likely effectiveness in getting them elected and the extent to which they would be able to share in the spoils of office once in power. If another party started to look more appealing, Thai politicians would have no hesitation in jumping ship. In order to get themselves elected, of course, politicians also had to be seen to bring some benefits to their constituencies. The most effective of them became seen as indispensable pillars of the community who skilfully used their position to enrich not only themselves but the region they represented.

In *Thailand Unhinged: The Death of Thai-Style Democracy*, Federico Ferrara lays out some of the

shortcomings of politics in Thailand:

The elections organized in 1975 are generally recognized as the first genuinely competitive elections held in the country's history. Not only was competition in this round of voting not hamstrung by the stringent restrictions traditionally imposed on political speech, assembly, and association; this time, no "government party" was there to parlay an outsized financial advantage and the exclusive control of the state into an all too predictable triumph at the polls.

Thailand's 1975 elections, however, bore all the hallmarks of the competition for contributors, candidates, and votes in the absence of strong, national party organizations. The government appointed by the King in 1973 to see the country through the transition was based on a coalition of no less than fourteen political parties. Having little territorial coverage and no organization in the districts, such parties chose to rely on two formidable local figures to mobilize votes in rural Thailand. To be sure, both had played some role in previous contests, but their support was only rendered more crucial by the increased competitiveness of national elections. First, parties enlisted typically unsavory characters known as *chao pho*, or "godfathers." Most commonly, *chao pho* were Sino-Thai provincial bosses who had made veritable fortunes in Thailand's vast submerged economy: guns, girls, gambling, and ganja. *Chao Pho* had much to offer an aspiring officeholder. They commanded the services of hundreds of young men and intricate organizational networks such as those in place to operate underground lotteries; as such, they were in a unique position to dispense patronage services to constituents on behalf of politicians. All they wanted in return was protection from the law. They were granted nothing less.

Second, budding political parties organized multi-layered networks of canvassers - or *hua khanaen* - who could deliver votes through a mixture of persuasion and moral authority (village teachers, temple abbots), coercion (common criminals), fraud (government officials) and vote-buying (all of the above). While government parties once had quasimonopolistic access to capable *hua khanaen*, the competition was much fiercer now that no surefire winner could be identified *ex ante* as guaranteeing a meaningful return on the investment of time, money, and reputation that any local notable would have to put into the election of a given candidate...

The 1975 elections returned a highly splintered House of Representatives where as many as 22 political parties - most of them mere electoral vehicles for politicians with a strong local base - occupied parliamentary seats... The painstaking process of cajoling so many different parties, as well as the manifold factions thereof, ultimately resulted in the formation of a limp, sixteen-party executive. An elaborate system of quotas was introduced, whereby each party and faction would receive a share of portfolios and undersecretaries commensurate with the number of MPs it commanded.

It has been pointed out that this method of dividing the spoils of government - born of necessity - set the Thai political system on the path to the kind of extreme fragmentation and instability it has exhibited ever since. Most importantly, perhaps, it created an incentive for already independent minded members of parliament to form factions that could trade their participation in the government's legislative majority for a cabinet post. The most ambitious and resourceful

representatives put together factions held together by their ability to bankroll the campaigns of less affluent followers; once in government, the faction leader would use the office to recoup his investment. The logic by which both factions and parties operated, moreover, was such to generate high levels of instability at both levels. Within factions, individual MPs could shift their support to whomever would pay the highest price for it. And, within parties, because most factions commanded their own finances and electoral organizations, little pressure could be exerted on them to exhibit any level of party discipline. In fact, all that bound different factions together in a single party was the expectation that the party would be invited to join the government. Accordingly, a party out of power could well expect to break up, as its factions scrambled to find alternative routes to all-important executive posts. [Ferrara, *Thailand Unhinged*]

The plentiful problems with Thai democracy were on full display in the 2005 polls, but as Boyce noted, the country was making more of an effort to curb at least some of them:

As the February 6 date for national parliamentary elections in Thailand draws closer we are seeing frequent allegations of vote buying and even some reports of poll-related killings. These activities have never been absent from the Thai electoral process in the past, but the degree to which authorities are able and willing to prosecute and punish political cheaters and to guarantee the security of campaign workers and candidates is one key measure of Thailand's current level of political maturity. [05BANGKOK801]

In a series of trips around the country ahead of the polls gave a flavour of how election campaigning works in 21st century Thailand. On a trip to Isaan, [northeastern Thailand](#), a source explained the mechanics of getting out the vote:

Generally, the parties select 3 canvassers per village. Each canvasser receives 1,000 baht and a mobile phone. A list with the registered voters is then divided among the three canvassers, who try to line up voters. Some use outright cash payments to buy votes. Others strong-arm voters by confiscating their Thai ID card, making photocopies of the cards and tell them intimidatingly that their names are being kept on a list. Some canvassers or party operatives also organize free trips by bus to Chiang Mai or to a popular theme park near Bangkok called Safari World. In exchange, voters support the candidate who pays for the trip. [05BANGKOK685]

During a visit to Phijit and Phitsanulok, one Election Commission official tried to play down talk of vote buying:

In a... meeting with the Phijit EC Chairman and former Deputy Permanent Secretary of Education, Phiphop Karnchana, the retired civil servant appeared surprised and somewhat irritated at our interest in the elections in his province. After taking his seat in a formal meeting room at the provincial hall, the 70-something man stated loudly, "Why did you come here? Write down your questions right now so I can answer them all right now." He then continued to look at papers and sign letters as we politely discussed some of the issues that we had just been talking about with his staff, who seemed a bit embarrassed at his behavior. The Chairman then gave a nice overview of preparations for the election, stating Phijit was fully prepared for the election

and there were “no problems” with vote buying or fraud in his province. [05BANGKOK953]

Local NGOs, of course, told a different story:

Parties appear to be getting more sophisticated in vote buying, offering a two-tiered system of pre-election gifts, such as dishes, clothes or Buddha images to voters in early January and now following up with "bonus money" in the next few days leading up to election day.

The trip illuminated another less than ideal aspect of Thai political culture - politics in many places is a family business, with constituencies being passed down from father to son (or daughter):

We met with veteran MP Adul Boonsert, of the TRT. Adul's late father was a prominent New Aspiration Party (NAP) MP. Now, with NAP merged into TRT, both Adul and his son, Nawin Boonsert (who is running for the first time in another district in Phijit) are campaigning under the TRT banner. If Nawin pulls out an unexpected win, he would be the first third generation MP in Thai history. The elder Boonsert appeared very confident of his own chances, noting that he really doesn't need to campaign on his own, leaving it to his beloved elderly mother and canvassers. He also admitted that going out on the campaign trail on his own was risky due to the possibility of dirty politicking and fraudulent claims of election violations being thrown at him from rivals.... Adul then showed off his many cars, including a Cadillac limousine, a Lincoln Town Car and a red Corvette sports car, all guarded by several men brandishing guns under their jackets.

Poloffs also met with the young, energetic opposition Democrat Party (DP) MP, Narapat Kaewthong, whose father was also a New Aspiration Party MP from Phijit province. Narapat received a yellow card four years ago for alleged irregularities that were noticed in ballots during the counting process. He was elected after a re-vote was mandated by the EC. This year, the PNET has already accused him of vote-buying, citing villagers who claim his canvassers distributed 400 baht to them in exchange for votes (100 baht was kept by the canvasser). Narapat never directly denied or acknowledged the vote buying when asked. After a long conversation over Pepsi at a hot, sunny roadside stand, Narapat finally surmised, “The real reason I'm confident I'll win is because the other party promised 500 baht per vote but is only paying 200. What an insult to the villagers!” He predicted that he will be red-carded by the EC after the election but has already made a plan. First he claimed to have a videotape of the TRT candidate at a meeting with local administration officials where the candidate actually gives out thousands of baht in advance for future vote buying. In case this blackmail doesn't work, Narapat has his younger sister running in his district under the "Thai Rak Thin" party banner, an older nearly defunct party with no current representation in Parliament. If he's eliminated and there is a revote, Narapat believes she will surely win with her name recognition. (Note: In a side conversation with members of PNET, and flanked by two armed bodyguards close at hand, Narawat said to them, "I respect your work, but you are just a paper tiger, you and the EC." End note.)

[05BANGKOK953]

In mountainous Phitsanulok province, officials described another method of manipulation:

In one area, voter registration lists include over 400 names of hill tribe villages who NGOs have confirmed have not lived in this area for years and whom no one in these small isolated communities has even heard of. As recently as last year, there were records that all of these persons voted in municipal elections. [05BANGKOK953]

Even in southern Thailand, traditionally a Democrat Party stronghold, Thai Rak Thai was putting up a fight and vote buying was on the rise:

One tactic was to hand prospective voters 20 Baht notes (approx. 40 baht equals one U.S. dollar) with a unique stamp on it. The recipient is told that if the named candidate wins, the stamped 20 baht note can be redeemed for a 1,000 baht note. Another tactic is to task the voter with taking a cell phone equipped with a camera into the voting booth to record that he or she had indeed marked the ballot for the "right" party, allowing for payment. [05BANGKOK948]

Few politicians have been so skillful at pork barrel politics - and in contrast, so inept at actually conducting the business of government - as Banharn Silpa-Archa, the godfather of Saphanburi, leader of the Chart Thai party, and also known as "Mr ATM" and "slippery eel". Boyce visited Saphanburi ahead of the elections:

On the road from Bangkok to Suphan Buri, car passengers immediately note a physical and audible change as they cross into the Central Region province on which Chat Thai leader Banharn Silpa-archa has lavished his attention for over 30 years. Vehicles glide smoothly and silently along a seamless four-lane highway of a quality probably found nowhere else in Thailand. Visitors soon learn that good roads are only one example of conspicuous infrastructure underlying why Suphan Buri province remains "Banharn country," the political stronghold of the former prime minister. Banharn, his son Varawut, his daughter Kanjan, and several Bhanharn lieutenants are expected to win all six of the province's parliamentary constituency seats on February 6.

Nuttavood Prasertsuvan, a personable two-term Chat Thai MP from Constituency 3, explained to poloff on February 3 why he expects to win again. He said he had tended all year to the needs of his constituents. He lent them money for emergencies, and attended weddings, funerals and other important events in their lives, thereby meeting the most important expectations they had of him. For this campaign he visited every home in the Constituency. He reeled off the statistics: there are 104,410 eligible voters in a population of 138,315 in his area, and all of them would have had some contact with him when they entered the 205 polling stations in Constituency 3 on election day. They would also remember, he said, that he had consistently delivered tangible benefits in the form of markets, buildings, ponds and other infrastructure under the tutelage of Bhanharn. As a result, within the memory of voters, life had improved and the farmers producing shrimp and rice (mainly for export to Africa and the Middle East) had prospered. Nuttavood commented that he had been a good MP on the House Committee on Consumer Protection, but this achievement was the one his constituents least cared about.

Banharn's son explained why "Mr ATM" was so popular:

Ultimately, he said, Suphan Buri voters knew how much his father was still delivering to them with his knowledge of how to maneuver in the government bureaucracies and obtain construction budgets. They appreciated the Silpa-archa family's use of its own money, funneled through a private foundation, to fund public projects and upkeep. Thirty years ago, local people used the river to travel to Bangkok and now dusty roads had been transformed into multi-lane highways, and Suphan Buri had parks, museums, colleges.

As Boyce comments at the end of the cable:

There is something to the CT candidates' claims that Banharn's role as master builder of Suphan Buri still commands the loyalties of local voters. This does not change the fact that Banharn also has a long record of use of money to bribe officials and further his political career (to the point of being known as "Mr. ATM"). No matter how much he pocketed for himself, Banharn has never forgotten his province. Suphan Buri really is one of the brightest and cleanest, most attractive towns in Thailand. The wide roads have center dividers beautified with flowers and no litter. All the government agency offices are located in one large compound, offering "one stop shopping" probably not found elsewhere. Ordinary citizens with whom poloff spoke all forthrightly expressed support for Banharn and Chat Thai. Several mentioned the parks he had built, including the beautiful one around Suphan Buri Tower, an impressive space needle-like structure, the highest in town, from which one can admire other projects, like the stadium. Poloff also saw hundreds of students enjoying themselves at Banharn's favorite project (which he inspects every Sunday), the Bueng Chawahk Marine Park, a well-stocked aquarium in a public area which also features a vegetable garden, a zoo and crocodile farm, all maintained by the individual government agencies that Banharn ensured would take responsibility for them. All this seems to secure the Chat Thai hold on Suphan Buri... [05BANGKOK955]

Banharn's shameless ability to sail along with whatever political winds are blowing was on full display a few years later. Having sworn in the name of the Emerald Buddha that he would never again join forces with Thaksin, he started to equivocate in late 2007 when it seemed clear the pro-Thaksin People's Power Party would win a landslide in elections, earning the mockery of massage parlour tycoon Chuwit Kamolvisit, a former political ally:

Chuwit responded by taking a restaurant table close to where Banharn was eating lunch with Abhisit, and conspicuously ordering a range of eel dishes. Chuwit's characterization of Banharn as a slippery eel proved prophetic when Chat Thai did indeed join the PPP-led coalition, abandoning the Democrats to a lonely opposition role. [McCargo, *Thailand: State of Anxiety*]

Clearly, then, [vote buying](#), electoral fraud, violence and intimidation, dirty tricks, pork barrel politics and nepotism were all alive and well in the Thai general election in 2005. But even Thaksin's most vociferous opponents have generally hesitated to suggest that the overall outcome did not reflect the will of the majority of the people. The fact is, Thaksin was immensely popular, and that was the reason for his spectacular 2005 election victory.

The argument of those who [conspired to throw Thaksin out of power](#) - and are still battling to keep him out of power - is more nuanced. The central thrust was that many Thais are simply not ready for democracy. Especially in rural areas, they say, feudal patronage networks and electoral bribery are rife, and country people often know no better than to sell their votes to the highest bidder. This means that populist and venal demagogues can seize power via the ballot box by duping and bribing the poor to vote for them, and then proceed to lead the country towards ruin by corruptly enriching themselves and their cronies at the expense of Thailand's national interest. And therefore, the argument goes, it is necessary for the enlightened elites among Bangkok's middle and upper classes, the judiciary, bureaucracy, military brass and – above all – the monarchy, to act as guardians and custodians of democracy, intervening when necessary to prevent their less sophisticated fellow citizens from making terrible mistakes by misguidedly casting their votes for the wrong person. Western-style democracy is not appropriate for Thailand – at least, not yet – and for the moment the morally-upright and well-educated elites must steer their dim-witted rural brethren with a firm but benevolent guiding hand.

The defining academic statement of this argument is *A Tale of Two Democracies: Conflicting Perceptions of Elections and Democracy in Thailand*, published in the 1996 book [The Politics of Elections in Southeast Asia](#). According to the argument, a perpetual tension in Thai politics results from the fact that uneducated rural voters, through their weight of numbers, persistently elect dubious governments and the Bangkok elites then have to struggle to curb the excesses of these administrations. Ferrara points out the deficiencies of the theory in *Thailand Unhinged*:

The conventional wisdom tells us that voters in the countryside could not care less about policy or ideology. Most are swayed by their deference to patrons and local authority figures. Most vote not their hearts or minds, but their basest parochial concerns — vulgar banalities like a politician's ability to create jobs, pave roads, build bridges, dig wells, and restore Buddhist temples. And most are eager to sell their votes to the highest bidder. To this day, as many as seven out of every ten of the King's subjects reside in thousands of villages and small towns dotting Thailand's vast rural landscape. As a result, elected legislatures are invariably stacked with representatives whom urban voters despise for their boorishness, gross incompetence, and overbearing avarice. Inept, predatory administrations, in turn, generate profound disillusionment in Bangkok - triggering a crescendo of support for the kind of military intervention that might once and for all deliver the country from the corruption and moral turpitude of its provincial politicians. The cycle begins anew when the urban middle class awakens to find military rule unpalatable, takes to the streets, suffers the requisite number of casualties, and somehow forces the generals back to the barracks.

This simple narrative recurs with some variation in the foreign scholarship and the Bangkok press, as it does in the work of Thai writers who are openly sympathetic to the plight of provincial voters. It arguably works best as an explanation for democracy's collapse in 1991, its subsequent return in 1992, and the bloodshed that marked the intervening period. Academic and activist Anek Laothamatas, in fact, wrote his well known statement on this twisted “tale of two democracies” to explain the build-up to Black May 1992 as well as to identify potential sources of future instability. The story, however, also has considerable bearing on the failure

of democracy in 1976. If, in particular, what doomed Thailand's elected government back then was its perceived inability to put up a strong enough fight against the advance of communism, the emergence of a hopelessly fragmented National Assembly reflected the particularism and personalization typical of political competition in the provinces. At the same time, the tacit support that much of the urban electorate offered the coup was grounded in the fear that a fourteen-party government dominated by bungling, money-grubbing politicians wouldn't be capable of shepherding the country through those trying times.

Just as Anek suggested, moreover, the juxtaposition of town and country has figured prominently in the run-up to the 2006 coup and the upheaval that Thailand has experienced since. If deposed Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra is especially popular among the urban proletariat and poor provincial voters in the North and Northeast, his staunchest opposition is found among middle and upper-income voters in the capital city. Provincial voters elected Thaksin. With a little help, Bangkokians got rid of him.

Of course, it's hard to deny that important differences in wealth, education, status, consumption habits, and even political culture separate upper-middle-class voters in Bangkok as Anek defines them, "middle-income persons employed in managerial, executive, or technical positions in the private sector, as well as self-employed professionals such as doctors, nurses, journalists, architects, and lawyers" - from the coolies, peasants, and petty shopkeepers who populate the country's provinces. And there is little doubt that different kinds of politicians tend to be popular among these broad and, lest we forget, internally variegated groups.³ For precisely these reasons, the conventional wisdom has a strong ring of truth. Its elegant characterization of Thailand's vicious cycle of democracy and dictatorship, cast in the simple terms of a deep social cleavage produced by modernization, renders this highly intelligible narrative ideal for wide dissemination and mass consumption.

But if the chasm between city and countryside is an important reason why Thailand never quite ceased to drift in and out of military dictatorship, the conventional wisdom offers little more than a caricature of the interests and aspirations of both urban and provincial voters. We should not be misled, moreover, into taking the politicization of demographic differences, however real and important, for inevitable. Nor, for that matter, should we fall for the notion that, at its core, this fracture has anything to do with democracy. [Ferrara, *Thailand Unhinged*]

it is by no means obvious that the support of much of Thailand's poor for Thaksin Shinawatra is evidence of their lack of understanding and the ease with which they can be bribed to support a leader who will not bring them any real benefits. [Andrew Walker](#) of the Australian National University, who runs the superb [New Mandala blog](#) with [Nicholas Farrelly](#), has written [a detailed analysis of rural voting](#). As he says:

Political commentators have regularly asserted that the Thai populace, and especially the rural populace, lacks the basic characteristics essential for a modern democratic citizenry. Accounts of the deficiencies of the voting population often focus on three key problems. First, uneducated rural voters are parochial and have little interest in policy issues. Lacking a well-developed sense of national interest they vote for candidates who can deliver immediate benefits. Secondly,

given their poverty and lack of sophistication they are readily swayed by the power of money. Vote buying is said to be endemic. Cash distributed by candidates, through networks of local canvassers, plays a key role in securing voter loyalty. And, thirdly, rural electoral mobilisation is achieved via hierarchical ties of patronage whereby local influential figures can deliver blocks of rural votes to their political masters. [Walker, *The rural constitution and the everyday politics of elections in Northern Thailand*]

And yet, as Walker convincingly shows with his analysis of Baan Tiam village an hour's drive from Chiang Mai, rural people may not have a deep grasp of the intricacies of politics, but they are more than capable of making a decision about which party they feel will do the most to improve their lives:

From the perspective of Baan Tiam's rural constitution, the Thaksin government was elected because a majority of voters considered that TRT candidates and policies best matched their values for political leadership. Often the match was imperfect but, on balance, TRT was the most attractive alternative on offer. This electoral decision was swept away in a wave of urban protest that culminated in the sabotaged election of April 2006 and the coup of September 2006. Coup supporters and constitutional alchemists have sought to de-legitimise Thaksin's electoral support by alleging that it is based on the financially fuelled mobilisation of an easily led and ill-informed rural mass. This erasure of the everyday political values contained in the rural constitution represents a much more fundamental threat to Thailand's democracy than the tearing up of the 1997 charter.

Moreover, all parties make use of vote buying and patronage networks, and this does not mean that rural voters are not able to cast their ballots sensibly for the party that offers them the best prospects for positive change. Thongchai Winichakul comprehensively skewers the anti-rural prejudices of the Bangkok establishment in *Toppling Democracy*:

The blame usually falls on the less educated and poor voters, mostly in rural areas, who allegedly sell their votes in exchange for short-term and petty material benefits. They lack the proper understanding of democracy, it is said, and lack good morals because they are ignorant and uninformed due to their lack of education. They are held to be partly responsible for the failure of democracy. Most of the education campaigns against vote-buying target the rural population and the urban poor. They are held to be infected by the disease, while the urban educated middle class are less so or not infected at all. The latter are champions of democracy whose task is to clean up politics. Certainly, the discourse on vote-buying is not groundless, and there are people who care for nothing but petty material gains. But the discourse is a gross generalisation based on the urban middle-class bias against the provincial-based electoral majority.

Thongchai notes that "rural citizens are more or less informed and conscious of their interests like their urban counterparts", and that the assumption of superiority by the Bangkok middle classes is really a sign of their ignorance:

The urban middle class, in general, are uninformed and ignorant; their bias robs them of the

opportunity to learn about their rural counterparts. [Thongchai, *Toppling Democracy*]

The irony of ignorant Bangkokians accusing their rural compatriots of stupidity was brilliantly captured by Reuters photographer Vivek Prakash in a picture taken at an anti-Red Shirt rally in 2010: one protester holds up a sign, in English, mocking the Red Shirts as “[uneducate PEOPLE](#)”.

But whatever the deficiencies of their arguments, the belief that Thailand’s masses need guidance, and that such guidance is fundamentally democratic rather than anti-democratic, is a key plank of what its proponents like to call “Thai-style democracy”. [Michael Connors](#) of Australia’s La Trobe University has brilliantly analyzed this ideology, which he calls “royal liberalism”:

Over time, Thai liberal democracy has come to mean governments which rule by the consent of the people when they are able to make the right choices, where power is divided among the executive, legislature and judiciary, and the king plays a guardianship role, and holds ultimate sovereignty. Fundamentally, liberalism in Thailand has been a disciplinary ideology that promotes the production of a citizen-body committed to elite constructions of nation, king and religion. [Connors, *Article of Faith: The Failure of Royal Liberalism in Thailand*]

In 2005 and 2006, Thai liberals who adhere to this ideology colluded with the palace, the military and right-wing mobs to bring down the elected government of Thaksin Shinawatra.

In many ways, Thaksin was fundamentally an old-style Thai politician, as Boyce convincingly argued. He used the same networks of patronage and canvassing, managed a parliamentary party that was more like a fractious coalition with each bloc requiring to be given a quota of seats and pork barrel projects, and he did not hesitate to enrich himself and his cronies further at every opportunity. But Thaksin thought big: for the first time in Thai politics, he formulated - and crucially *implemented* - a set of policies with national rather than local vision. When people voted for Thai Rak Thai they were not just voting for personalities, although Thaksin’s image played a huge part in the party’s success. They were also voting for a coherent policy platform.

The landslide victory of Thaksin Shinawatra's Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party in the February 6 parliamentary election victory reconfirmed the Prime Minister's domination of the Thai political landscape. Thaksin's personality, sophisticated media presentation, focused populist message, and traditional get-out-the-vote organizing combined to allow TRT to leave the Democratic Party, its closest rival, in the political dust. The February 6 election is regarded as generally free and fair...

The key to TRT's overwhelming win was the enormous personal prestige of PM Thaksin with the Thai electorate, an appeal he bolstered by delivering on promised populist programs and slick political marketing tactics throughout his first term. While the Thaksin image is underpinned by Thailand's spurt in economic growth and full recovery from the 1997 Asian financial crisis, it has also been skillfully built up...

In the Thai context, Thaksin's confident personality lent itself to image magnification. As a largely self-made billionaire, he has benefited from Buddhist beliefs, still strong in the rural electorate, that success in this life reflects having lived a good life in the previous incarnation. The decisive "CEO" image that he cultivated may annoy members of the Thai elite and sophisticated urbanites, but it appeals to other voters who believe Thailand needs a tough leader to address social problems and walk proudly on the international stage. His combative statements, harsh strategies of wars on drugs, corruption and, over the last year, on Muslim separatists in the South attracted many Thais even as they appalled international observers...

Examples abound... of how PM Thaksin, working closely with media savvy TRT aides, transformed many of his day-to-day duties of his office into opportunities to highlight his decisive leadership and populist policies. PM Thaksin regularly holds "mobile" cabinet meetings - at least one a month - in different provinces outside of Bangkok. These traveling roadshows always projected the Prime Minister sleeping on a mat at a local Buddhist temple, or walking with farmers in the fields promising them debt relief, or fixing some thorny local dispute with the Governor or local officials. These populist images helped keep Thaksin's personal approval rates consistently above 60 percent. They are reinforced by Thaksin's use of weekly radio talks (suspended during the official election campaign) to explain his actions to "the people." ...

Aside from the personal draw of Thaksin and the popularity of his populist policies with poor urban and rural voters, the TRT party showed itself to be better organized and innovative than the opposition parties. As illustrated, TRT insiders proved throughout Thaksin's first term their mastery of modern marketing techniques to boost the Prime Minister's image and sell his programs. TRT demonstrated it could appeal over the heads of local power brokers directly to voters, but at its core it remains a party combining factions of tough "traditional" politicians, whose political styles remain common. [05BANGKOK1278]

In his [wonderful 2010 analysis of the country's crisis](#), James Stent, a former financier with decades of experience in Thailand, captured the unquestioned brilliance of Thaksin Shinawatra - and his fatal flaws:

Thaksin astutely recognized that the majority of voters were resident in the countryside, and that they had, over the preceding decades of steady economic development, become a sleeping but nonetheless restless giant that was just waiting to be awakened. Once awakened, that rural electorate has not returned to sleep.

It is well to remember that when Thaksin was first campaigning, he was not only supported by the rural masses, but also by a number of forward thinking and responsible intellectuals in Bangkok, who saw in him a new type of politician who might bring about some of the changes in Thailand that they knew were needed if Thailand were to be a modern nation and competitive in the 21st century. This is significant, as it indicates that a decade ago, a portion of the intelligentsia of Thailand was aware of the need for change in the country, and, despairing of people like Chuan to bring a new vision to the governance of the country, they placed their hopes in Thaksin as an agent of change.

The tragedy is that Thaksin proved to be a false prophet - a venal and egotistical demagogue who had recognized the potential power of the rural voting masses, but did not use this insight to genuinely reform the nature of Thai society. His motivations seem to me to have been a complex mixture of genuine interest in promoting the good of the nation with greed for power and wealth for himself. I see him in shades of gray—neither the messiah that his rural followers take him for even today, nor the devil incarnate that the Bangkok elite see him as being. But whatever his true nature, he did implement several good policies, such as health care for the poor and the “One Tambol One Product”, but he became increasingly corrupt, intolerant, and dictatorial in his governing style. The press was gradually intimidated, the judiciary and other independent parts of the government were subverted, and human rights violations became increasingly blatant.

Yet in the elections of 2005, Thaksin’s party was returned to power with the largest mandate ever awarded by the electorate to a Thai political leader. The Democratic Party, effectively the only organized parliamentary opposition that remained, proved from the time of Thaksin’s election in 2001 unable to rethink its approach and image, or to present rural voters with any sort of credible alternative to Thaksin. The educated middle and upper classes of Bangkok were seething with resentment, but my own feeling at the time was that either they would have to put up some viable political alternative to Thaksin, or accept that they were going to have to live under the man for some time to come, as the inevitable price they paid for having failed to develop an inclusive national vision that reached out to and involved the poorer majority of voters who now had turned to Thaksin as their political idol.

Bangkok friends retorted that Thaksin was elected only because of the power of his wealth, and that the voters were bribed. From my own experience in the village of Baan Ton Thi in Chiang Rai, I knew that Thaksin’s Thai Rak Thai party was indeed alleged to have paid THB 500 to each villager to secure their votes, but in conversations with the villagers, it was apparent that these villagers genuinely liked what Thaksin was doing for them, and felt that he was the first Thai politician who talked to them about their own welfare, and who delivered on his promises. It is a measure of the power of Thaksin’s PR machine that among the villagers, all good things that were happening in the kingdom were attributed to Thaksin. When I asked the villagers if it were not true that Thaksin was very corrupt, the amused response invariably was “Of course, he is corrupt - all politicians are corrupt, but this is the first corrupt politician who has done something for us.” To this day, the corruption, abuses, and personal wealth of Thaksin are glossed over by his rural supporter - not denied, just treated as irrelevant. [Stent, *Thoughts on Thailand’s Turmoil*]

Stent illuminates the flaws that were to prove fatal to Thaksin’s premiership: he is a man with no shortage of enemies, but his biggest enemy of all is very often himself. His audacity often crossed the line into recklessness, and his eagerness to promote a blunt-speaking *nakleng* image often caused him to say needlessly inflammatory things.

Shortly after his landslide victory he was already in trouble, over an intemperate outburst directed at critics of his botched handling of the Muslim insurgency in the south:

On February 21, PM Thaksin, displaying again his low tolerance for public criticism, delivered a

lengthy tirade about critics of his southern security policies. In response to questions from local reporters, Thaksin, said: "That group of academics, they hit at me and hit at me, but never make any constructive suggestions." He called into question their patriotism and further described them using a highly pejorative reference in Thai, "meng". (Comment: The term, in colloquial Thai comes from "mae meung" or literally, "your mother". It is widely understood -- including by those for whom it was meant -- to mean "motherf...ers". End Comment). Many media commentators and academics immediately pointed out that such language should not be used by the PM in public discourse about such an important and sensitive subject. Thaksin's use of the term made big news in Thailand, where politeness and proper speech, especially in public, are of paramount importance, but also because a slip of the tongue by the PM on national TV makes for a good story...

Aside for the "usual suspects" (one of his milder dismissive terms), he quickly heard clear cautions from General Surayud, which may also reflect sentiments held by others in the Privy Council, a power base he cannot ignore. Thaksin may also have received a signal of displeasure from the King, although this is conjecture thus far supported only by the timing of his audience and the subsequent announcement of the special joint session of Parliament at the end of March. [05BANGKOK1375]

With his vast parliamentary majority, Thaksin was in an unprecedentedly strong position. But this was not good enough for him. With increasing ruthlessness he continued a an assault on the checks and balances on executive power put in place by the 1997 constitution. In his view, he had the overwhelming support of the people, so why should unelected bureaucrats constrain him? One by one, the institutions designed to curb the power of the prime minister were co-opted and rendered toothless. And even his own senior ministers were treated as little more than lackeys:

Major decision-making obviously centered on him. Even his most trusted ministers appeared unwilling to embark in new directions without his specific instruction. [05BANGKOK3208]

The Senate upper house, supposed to be an assembly of elder statesmen keeping a watchful eye on parliament, became dominated with Thaksin stooges. The media was intimidated, or bought.

Thaksin complained vociferously about how he is targeted by the Bangkok elite and the media. He said there were two major problems in Thai society, the press and the courts. "In the old days, reporters and editors were paid off by crooked politicians and gamblers. Previous PMs were more subservient to the press too, frequently doing them favors." He explained that his unwillingness to do so was the reason he is attacked in the Thai media. [05BANGKOK5393]

Friends bought large stakes in leading news organisations [05BANGKOK5490], and with the help of the pliable Senate, a new National Broadcasting Commission was selected that also had close ties to Thaksin:

The selection of the candidates came amid controversy, as many of the Senators allegedly had previous connections with some of the candidates they selected. Critics are saying that in light of the governing Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party's already strong control over much of Thailand's media,

this latest step is a serious blow to press freedom in Thailand. [05BANGKOK6269]

The National Counter Corruption Commission - loathed by Thaksin ever since it ruled in 2000 that he had concealed assets and forced him to fight for his political life before the Constitutional Court - was also packed with cronies:

Thailand's anti-corruption process suffered a serious blow with the November 1 announcement of the selection of nine potentially biased nominees to serve in the government's National Counter Corruption Commission (NCCC). Critics allege that most of the nominees have close ties with Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and the ruling Thai Rak Thai (TRT) political party and will render legal judgements accordingly. The fear expressed here is that the continued delay in filling positions in the Thai government's anti-corruption agencies will allow the seemingly endless parade of corruption allegations against individuals connected to the TRT to continue unchecked.

After spending most of their time debating whether or not they should vote at all, the Senate selected the nine commissioners after two rounds of voting. Seven of the nine candidates selected have very close and obvious ties to the Prime Minister or the TRT. They include:

- A Deputy Secretary General to the PM, who is also the relative of the PM's wife;
- A Chairman of the Defense Ministry's Advisory Board;
- A Deputy Chief of the National Intelligence Office;
- A former police academy classmate of the PM;
- A Provincial Administrator that defended the PM and TRT after the Tak Bai incident;
- A former professor of the PM and advisor to the PM's office;
- A Supreme Court judge that has previously backed the TRT, and who is also the brother of a TRT MP and the party's legal advisor [05BANGKOK6958]

Anybody standing in the way of the Thaksin juggernaut was being mercilessly crushed.

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Bangkok's elites - from progressive liberals to die-hard royalists and hawkish generals - were dismayed. The liberals were genuinely concerned that democracy was being destroyed; as Connors says:

Thaksin's rise to power through the ballot box should not be allowed to disguise his fundamentally anti-democratic politics. The elected Thaksin regime (2001-06) was authoritarian in inclination even if the formal institutions of democracy were in place. Despite Thaksin's arguably pro-poor policies, the depth and quality of Thailand's democracy was greatly diminished under his rule. [Connors, *Article of Faith: The Failure of Royal Liberalism in Thailand*]

Those in the establishment with more authoritarian leanings were horrified at the threat to their continued ability to meddle in politics:

Thaksin set about systematically to dismantle the political networks loyal to Prem in a wide range of sectors, aiming to replace them with his own supporters, associates and relatives. Thaksin was seeking to subvert network monarchy, and to replace it with ... a network based on insider dealing and structural corruption. The core struggle of the 1990s was one between conservatives associated with the military and bureaucracy, and liberal reformers seeking to strengthen civil society and political institutions. But Thaksin, the policeman turned tycoon turned prime minister, was playing according to completely different rules and ideas, favouring a toxic mode of leadership which left little space for rival players. [McCargo, *Network monarchy and legitimacy crises in Thailand*]

But given the prime minister's vast public support, especially among the poor, and iron grip on the levers of power, how could he be halted?

Evidence suggests that Prime Minister Thaksin is alienating an ever-growing segment of the political class. The antipathy that started with NGOs and journalists is spreading; by some accounts, it includes many in the military leadership and reaches even to the palace. At the same time, Thaksin's populist policies are winning him acceptable numbers in the public opinion polls. His nationalist rhetoric on the South makes him look strong, (even if the government's policies are ineffective.) In any case, his lock on the National Assembly - 375 out of 500 seats - hamstring the organized political opposition, which cannot stop the PM's legislative program. Thai Rak Thai's (TRT) strong position in the allegedly non-partisan Senate means that the Senate-appointed agencies that should act as a break on the PM's power are suborned before they are even established. What's a Thaksin opponent to do?

The anti-Thaksin forces are reduced to hoping for help from two extremes - the street, and the palace. There is some irony here: the democratic opposition and civil society are pinning their short term hope on rather undemocratic solutions. This fight so far is waged mostly in arcane (to foreign observers, at least) skirmishes over the views of elderly monks or obscure constitutional procedures. The opposition appears to be looking for a way to provoke Thaksin into taking one step too far in encroaching on the prerogatives of the much-loved monarch, and provoking public outrage in response... A few others even raise the (highly unlikely) possibility that Thaksin opponents might arrange "an accident" to remove the PM. We believe that Thaksin is still in a strong position, but he is impulsive; a major misstep - or a series of them - would embolden Thaksin's critics and increase his vulnerability. [05BANGKOK7197]

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An early battle centred on the unlikely figure of Jaruvan Maintaka, a 60-year-old career bureaucrat who as Auditor General investigated investigations of corruption - in particular, [irregularities in the procurement of scanners](#) for Bangkok's new airport - rather more doggedly than Thaksin was comfortable with, much to his undisguised irritation. Allies of the prime minister uncovered a technical irregularity in the way she had been selected, and judges ruled in 2004 that her appointment had been unconstitutional. Jaruvan was having none of it. Despite her salary being stopped and a replacement named, she continued to insist that she was Thailand's rightful Auditor General and she would stay in her post until King

Bhumibol signalled otherwise.

Jaruwan epitomizes one of the core constituencies of the Yellow Shirt movement - strait-laced middle-class aunties for whom reverence for Rama IX is the guiding principle of their lives. Revealing remarks from Jaruwan to U.S. embassy officials illuminate the way the network monarchy operates in Thailand - on the basis of a few hints and a firm handshake, she was convinced that she was acting in the interests of the king:

Poloff met Khunying Jaruwan Maintaka on November 14 in a private meeting room in the Thai Senate. She was accompanied by her lawyer, who was as brash and self-promoting as Jaruwan is quiet and self-effacing. Jaruwan has kept a low profile personally for the past 18 months as the controversy about attempts to replace her as Auditor-General has grown. Jaruwan explained that the Asian way of dealing with issues to resolve them peacefully, and that everyone benefits by saving face and not increasing tensions in an over-politicized issue. She added that she wants the legal and constitutional mechanisms to work. But most importantly, Jaruwan firmly believes that the quiet support from King Bhumibol sends the strongest message of all, and that nothing she says or does can top that...

Jaruwan said candidly that the Prime Minister is very aware of the corruption that takes place within his government, and that his administration would fall apart if she were allowed to fully pursue these numerous incidents of graft and bring them to light. Jaruwan noted that Thaksin allies (and in one instance, Thaksin's sister) repeatedly tried to bribe her. Her continued refusals to be suborned amid her deeper probes into the CTX GEInVision equipment graft, however, was the issue that led to the effort to remove her from office...

Jaruwan mentioned other cases involving people at the very top of Thai politics. One such case involved a building renovation contract coordinated by House Speaker Uthai Pimchaichon. Jaruwan estimated that the cost of renovation should have been 20 million baht (\$500,000 USD), but the total bill came to over 100 million baht (\$2.5 million USD). Jaruwan claims that Uthai tried to bribe her on six separate occasions to persuade her to stop the audit, each time offering significantly more money (and, according to Jaruwan, at one time offering a six bedroom house). Jaruwan said that the initiatives to nullify her stature as Auditor-General began with Uthai, and that they only began after she refused the final bribe. In another case, Transport Minister Suriya Jungrungreangkit personally asked Jaruwan to withdraw from a case involving extremely rare government loans to private sector businesses to finance a new southern ring road near Bangkok. The most recent case potentially reaches to Thaksin himself. Thaksin recently traveled to France and may have been involved with securing the purchase of four satellites by Shin Satellite--the company founded by Thaksin and currently owned by members of his family--from a French company at a cost of \$68 million each. The price tag of a failed bid to purchase similar satellites from a U.S. company last year was only \$28 million each...

Jaruwan tends to believe that Thaksin is corrupt primarily for the purpose of gaining power, not money. Jaruwan appeared hesitant to outright insult the Prime Minister, but her lawyer wasn't shy and said that Thaksin is obsessive about power, has a huge ego, and wants to have

total control over the country. Jaruwan believes that Thaksin is aware of corrupt practices from members of his own party, and he tolerates them because of their loyalty in supporting his political and personal agenda. Jaruwan said that the reason Thaksin wants her neutralized is because her actions would expose the depth of the Thai Rak Thai's corruption. Jaruwan insisted that there will be no progress in fighting corruption as long as Thaksin remains in power: Thaksin was "beyond hope for washing his hands of corruption."

Many Ministers, the House Speaker, and a plethora of MPs are implicated in corruption, but Jaruwan is perhaps most concerned about the influence Thaksin has over the Senate, which is by design supposed to be a non-partisan legislative body that ultimately keeps powerful political parties and government agencies in check. Jaruwan believes that a majority of the 200-member body is under the influence of Thai Rak Thai, although there are also a fair number of Senators that are 'untouchable' and have put up a stiff fight for her. Jaruwan has witnessed her own support in the Senate fade despite her track record of hard work and honesty, and believes that it is completely due to TRT influences. Jaruwan believes that the number of Senators under TRT influence has grown over time, with some being bought off directly while others were blackmailed by TRT officials for exposing skeletons in their closet. (Comment: the TRT has been known to go back years into a political opponents career and air the dirty laundry long after tolerating it at the time of the issue. End Comment.) She also believes that some Senators are jockeying for positions after their term in the Senate expires in March 2006 and leaves them unemployed, and who better to impress than the most powerful Prime Minister in recent times?

Jaruwan is concerned that Thailand's separation of powers is shrinking to the point where the branches of government are inseparable, and that Thaksin will become an authoritarian ruler. Jaruwan's attorney didn't hesitate to chime in that he thought an "unplanned change" of Thailand's leadership is inevitable--perhaps within the next two months--if Thaksin's authoritarian practices didn't stop. Although Jaruwan didn't state anything that went as far as her attorney's outspoken agenda, she does believe that the curtailing of her powers and that of other agencies to check corrupt people in government is part of a larger issue facing Thailand. Commented Jaruwan: "the situation is much more serious than you thought." ...

But most importantly, Jaruwan truly believes she has the support of the King... There is no greater ally to have in Thailand than the King, whose moral authority are unquestioned here. Jaruwan is convinced she has the King's support for many reasons. First, at the time she was appointed to be Auditor-General in 2001, she claims the King firmly gripped her hand as he gave her a pin signifying her position, an act which many Thai would view as unusual and very significant. Second, Jaruwan says she has already provided the King with summaries of the incidents of graft, and that he expressed his gratitude for her efforts. Lastly, Jaruwan claims that she has quietly received an offer from the Palace to receive her salary for her entire five-year term, regardless of whether she returns to her post or not. [05BANGKOK7305]

One of the most effective things Bhumibol can do to signal his wishes without appearing to interfere in politics is very simple: do nothing at all. When the government forwarded the name of a replacement for Jaruwan to the palace for approval - usually a formality - the response was a prolonged and increasingly

uncomfortable (for Thaksin) silence.

The Palace's silence has become deafening and now there is increasing call for the resignation of Senate Speaker Suchon Suwanpanont for trying to remove Jaruvan and for sending Wisut's name to the King for approval without final determination of Jaruvan's status. The issue is also causing tensions within the TRT. More significantly, the discussion emanating from the Auditor-General controversy has ignited discussion over the powers of the monarchy. [05BANGKOK5917]

At a loss about what to do, Thaksin's allies eventually withdrew the nomination of Jaruvan's replacement:

The Senate's unexpected nomination of a new Auditor-General became a lightning rod of controversy for the Thai Rak Thai, and most notably for Senate Speaker Suchon Chaleekrua... The Thai public has shown an unusual amount of anger towards the Senate because the move to replace the current Auditor-General without the King's endorsement has been seen as a challenge to the King's authority. Although the King saves his direct involvement in political affairs for the most serious of issues, his silence on a proposal or a nominee almost always indicates his disapproval, and that he wants the parties to resolve it on their own. As more time continued to pass after this nomination was submitted to the King, the more it came to be seen as challenging the King to do something - not something customarily done in Thailand. By withdrawing the nomination, any perceived pressure for the King to make a statement on the matter - and thus any offense against the King - has ended. The King accepted the withdrawal for consideration to the post, but did not say anything more about the fate of the current Auditor-General, Jaruvan. [05BANGKOK6240]

(The Jaruvan saga continues to drag on, with the embattled auntie still clinging to her post, even though she is now past the mandatory retirement age. In one particularly bizarre incident, she sabotaged an attempt by her latest would-be successor to hold a meeting in 2010, standing behind him and repeatedly poking him in the shoulder, and then having a tug-of-war over the microphone. Her transformation from genteel *khunying* to office guerrilla warrior mirrors the increasing extremism and shrillness of the Yellow Shirts as the crisis has progressed.)

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If Jaruvan was the heroine of the anti-Thaksin movement in 2005, there is no doubt about the hero: media magnate and Thaksin's friend-turned-nemesis [Sondhi Limthongkul](#). Sondhi is a former journalist, including for the UCLA student paper [The Daily Bruin](#), who was for many years an acolyte of Thaksin, famously calling him "the best prime minister our country has ever had". He fell out with Thaksin in 2004 after his friend Viroj Nualkhair, a financier who had saved Sondhi from bankruptcy after forgiving 1.6 billion baht in debt, was dismissed from Krung Thai Bank after the prime minister failed to intercede to save him. In 2005, Sondhi began using his Thailand Weekly television show to attack Thaksin. Channel 9 [dropped the show](#) in September under pressure from Thaksin's allies. But in the 21st century, it is increasingly difficult to block the free flow of information and opinion: Sondhi broadcast his show instead by satellite and webcasts, and started holding huge rallies in Bangkok's Lumpini park. The Yellow Shirt movement was born.

In September, an elderly monk launched a furious attack on Thaksin:

Thaksin's latest "proxy confrontation" with the palace involves an ancient monk from northeast Thailand, and a businessman-cum-journalist (both of whom used to be Thaksin supporters). The monk, Luangta Maha Bua, delivered a sermon in September that compared Thaksin to a "powerful giant with savage power to swallow the country" that "puts its feet on the people's heads, eating their lungs and livers." Most seriously, he accused Thaksin and his cabinet of trying to "swallow the country, religion and King" and "lead the country to a presidential system." The businessman/journalist, Sondhi Limthongkul, owner/publisher of several Thai newspapers, printed the text of the sermon in the news daily "Manager" on September 28. On October 11, Thaksin filed civil and criminal libel complaints against Sondhi, seeking 500 million baht in compensation... Thaksin did not, however, sue the venerable monk, saying that Luangta Maha Bua had helped him in the past...

This was the second lawsuit filed against Sondhi by the prime minister in October. On October 3, the PM filed a suit against Sondhi following the broadcast of his popular (and subsequently canceled) television program, "Thailand Weekly." On that broadcast, Sondhi repeated his previous criticism that the government had undermined the King's prerogatives and the Sangha (the Buddhist leadership) by controversially appointing an "acting Supreme Patriarch" in January 2004 (allegedly to "assist" the ailing Supreme Patriarch appointed by the Sangha and the King). Sondhi accused Thaksin of choosing a monk who is close to his wife's family to take this position. Sondhi then read a pointed allegory, comparing a "good father" who raises his 60 million children virtuously to an "eldest son" who lets the other children be "spoiled and enslaved by wealth, headphones and gambling." That suit also sought 500 million baht in compensation. (Channel 9 canceled the show. Sondhi sued Channel 9.)

Sondhi continues to hammer on the theme of Thaksin's purported challenge to the King. Although "Thailand Weekly" is off the air, Sondhi continues to stage the "show" each week before eager crowds at public venues. Last week, thousands of people turned out in Bangkok's main park to hear Sondhi, who wore a T-shirt with the motto, "I will fight for the King." ...

In a recent conversation with Sondhi, he was upbeat about the situation. He boasted that he'd been sued many times, and never lost a case. He said that Thaksin was "unbalanced" in his reaction to criticism, and that, with this latest suit, he had gone too far...

The accusations against Thaksin also keep coming. The anti-Thaksin papers have resurfaced an accusation against Thaksin from earlier this year. In April, the PM presided over a ceremony in the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, one of the most sacred sites in the kingdom. The press claimed first that no commoner had the right to preside over such a ceremony. When the government produced a signed authorization from the palace, Thaksin's opponents raised further objections about the authenticity of the documents and whether they allowed Thaksin to preside over, or just participate in, the ceremony. This week, a retired general sued Thaksin for lese-majeste over the incident.

What is the point of all of this? Sondhi, a flamboyant but appealing political gadfly, clearly relishes his one-man crusade against the PM. He does not appear to be working actively in concert with any of the opposition parties or civil society groups. But he is carrying yet further the tactic already used in the long controversy over the Auditor-General... In the AG case, anti-Thaksin forces did not highlight the most obvious accusation - that the government's allies in the Senate were trying to replace an active and effective official fighting corruption. Rather, they focused on the claim that the replacement of the AG challenged the King's authority, since the King had appointed her. During the first phase of the controversy, opposition politicians allowed themselves to hope the issue would bring the students and others onto the streets in a real challenge to the government. This was, of course, misguided thinking and stirred up little public enthusiasm for protest. But some Thaksin opponents continue to think that hammering on these issues will soon provoke a outburst from the public that could, ultimately, unseat the PM.

Sondhi told us he predicts Thaksin will run into serious trouble, and that there would be violence, before the end of the year. An associate of the Auditor General made a similar prediction. One journalist told us he was surprised that Thaksin dared to leave the country for so long in September (for the UNGA and White House meeting). Several contacts have even hinted darkly that Thaksin "might have an accident." On top of this, some claim that Thaksin has so alienated the military - by favoring the police over the army, and by his bungling of the problems in the south -- that the military would not support him if there were a crisis.

So, what does the palace really think? It's not easy to tell what the King actually wants. It is widely presumed among the political class that the King and his closest councillors loathe Thaksin. However, the King conveys his views in signs so subtle that much of the ordinary Thai public probably misses them, even if they do make it into a news report. For example, the King reportedly takes care to be photographed calling on the "real" Supreme Patriarch. The King's daughter, Princess Chulabhorn, visited the crotchety monk in October in a ceremony broadcast on TV, and raised money for his temple. The King's refusal to respond to the nomination of a replacement for the Auditor General was taken as a slap in the face to TRT and the PM, presumed to be behind the move. The palace delayed the approval of the military promotions list proposed in October; because Thaksin had reportedly meddled with the list, this delay was likewise seen as a subtle rebuke to the PM. The King's annual birthday speech in December seems to contain barely-veiled digs at Thaksin each year. This may not seem like much to an outsider, and care must be taken to not read too much into royal gestures (or lack of them). But the King's every action is carefully scrutinized -- at least by the political class -- and his moral authority is unequalled among the Thai.

COMMENT: Thaksin's opponents can't unseat him (at least, in the short term) through the ballot box, so they feel they have to try something. There isn't much hope of seriously splintering TRT, which seems to be largely sticking by the PM that brought them to power. It is difficult to evaluate the hints that Thaksin "might have an accident." Violence is a feature of political life here even today, and Thaksin has plenty of enemies. Still this strikes us as extreme and unlikely. The opposition parties and NGOs remember 1992, when the power of street demonstrations,

coupled with the resulting loss of royal support, helped oust a despised PM; those who are virulently anti-Thaksin hope such tactics might work again. They are overestimating, in our view, the resonance of their issues with a public more preoccupied with economic livelihood. Even for the Thai who are aware of tensions between the King and PM, TRT's populist programs seem to outweigh other considerations. And so far, people don't really have to choose between the King and the PM; they are happy to take the government's 30 baht health scheme, its village development fund, its million cow program and all the rest, and then show their veneration to the King at the same time. It is hard to see how Sondhi and the political opposition can inflict serious political damage on Thaksin with these current tactics. However, they are clearly set to keep provoking the PM with accusation after accusation, knowing that Thaksin, with his tendency to speak and act before he thinks, is frequently his own worst enemy.

Boyce's comment was prescient: in the months that followed, Thaksin did indeed prove his own worst enemy, making a series of missteps that were to embolden the Yellow Shirt masses. His arrogant dismissal of the elderly monk's efforts to mediate a meeting was one such misjudgment:

Luangta Maha Bua, a controversial and popular monk, has offered to act as a mediator between the two men in order to prevent the conflict from destabilizing the country. It was a sermon made by Luangta in September that sparked the first lawsuit against Sondhi. "The Manager" newspaper, which is owned by Sondhi, published a scathingly critical sermon made by Luangta in which the monk compared Thaksin to an ancient mythological monster. The PM elected to sue to Sondhi, but purposefully left Luangta out of the lawsuit saying the monk, a former supporter, had been kind to him in the past. Luangta dispatched several hundred monks to offer moral support to Sondhi on November 21. That same day he invited both men to come to a "peace meeting" at his monastery in Udon Thani in order to resolve their differences. Sondhi showed up but the Prime Minister took a rain check, saying he had matters of state to attend to, but that he would be happy to meet with the monk, but not necessarily Sondhi, "when time permits." [05BANGKOK7317]

In a series of rallies, Sondhi made several allegations about Thaksin's misuse of office for personal gain and prestige. The accusations were extremely accurate - Sondhi clearly had plenty of inside information. Thaksin responded with lawsuits, but he could not shut up his former friend:

Defying a November 17 court order banning him from criticizing the PM, outspoken talk show host Sondhi Limthongkul continued with his weekly "mobile talk show" in Bangkok. The rally attracted an estimated 30-40,000 people. Sondhi detailed two heretofore new scandals, alleging that the Prime Minister's sister had used a government plane to transport friends to her housewarming party, and citing possibly inappropriate links between the Prime Minister and a millionaire Chinese businessman with dual nationality. The Government has so far taken no action to arrest Sondhi, although party spokespeople accused Sondhi of working with the opposition in order to try and topple the government. Despite government efforts to limit the broadcast of the speech, Sondhi's speech was available throughout the country via cable television and community radio. The mainstream media barely covered the event. With intimidation tactics not working on Sondhi, the RTG now has to decide whether to make an arrest, potentially leaving them with a political prisoner on their hands...

The assembled crowd was especially notable for its diversity; Thais of all ages and economic classes were well-represented in the audience. Poloff observed students in school uniforms, Muslim girls in headscarves, groups of elderly men and women, upscale young professionals as well as a large cadre of volunteers passing out literature and selling t-shirts and other paraphernalia. About 20% of those in the crowd were wearing yellow t-shirts emblazoned with the motto "We shall fight for The King" written in Thai...

Sondhi began his show with a nod to the gag order, saying he was free to discuss any and all issues except those specifically mentioned by the court. He asked for the crowd's support for his efforts to have the order overturned in court the following week. He threatened to petition the Administrative Court against any ban on local cable television stations carrying his program saying "The Prime Minister keeps preaching about the creation of a knowledge-based society, but how can this kind of establishment come true if the people's rights to information have not been guaranteed?" Sondhi then played an old video-clip of Prime Minister Thaksin in which he promised to uphold the right of the Thai people to freedom of speech, eliciting hoots and applause from the audience.

As opposition to Thaksin swelled, rumours began to circulate that the military might turn again to their favourite pastime: launching a coup:

In a throwback to an earlier age, coup rumors have been swirling around the capital ever since Supreme Commander General Ruengroj Mahasaranond warned that the army might lose patience if Sondhi continued to refer to the monarchy in his rallies. This was followed by statement by several members of the ruling TRT party that Sondhi and the opposition were working together to "topple the government". Sutin Klungsang, a deputy spokesman for TRT went so far as to say that the party had "a piece of in-depth intelligence that a group of people was plotting to overthrow the government." Phumtham Wechayachai, a Deputy Minister, claimed Sondhi's rallies were a practice run for staging a coup. The persistent rumors have become serious enough to have a negative effect on the Thai stock market and have reportedly hurt short-term investor confidence. Government spokesmen have now gone out of the way to assure the public that there is no imminent coup with the Defense Minister and the Prime Minister's Office Minister assuring people that the democratic system was too firmly embedded into Thai society for a coup d'etat to take place in 2005. [05BANGKOK7317]

Luckily, military chief Sonthi Boonyarataglin assured the Thai people that a coup in the 21st century was unthinkable:

Even the Commander-in-Chief of the Army, General Sondhi Bunyaratgalin, felt the need to step into the fray, saying that "You can rest assured that there will be no coup as long as I serve as the Army chief." [05BANGKOK7317]

By late November, Thailand's political crisis was more fraught than ever:

Government critic Sondhi Limthongkul hosted his tenth "mobile talk show" from a monastery in Udon Thani. A crowd of approximately 50,000 gathered in Bangkok's Lumpini Park to listen to Sondhi offer revelations of new scandals concerning the Thai Rak Thai government. In the two-hour program, Sondhi alleged that shadowy "powers that be" had threatened his life. He also criticized the 2004 decision to appoint an "acting Supreme Patriarch" and offered a scathing rebuttal to Deputy Transport Minister Phumtham's accusations of disloyalty. He also slammed the RTG for trying to cover up the scandal involving PM Thaksin's younger sister Montathip and the C-130. Sondhi ended the rally with a call for 500,000 people to attend his next show on December 9 to "show the government that it no longer has legitimacy to run this country". [[05BANGKOK7345](#)]

On the king's birthday, Bhumibol [said he was not prefect](#). The clear implication was that Thaksin should accept criticism too. But the prime minister emerged from the audience in a positive mood.

Prime Minister Thaksin came to the residence on December 7 flush from what he considered a boost from the King's birthday speech several days earlier. Thaksin said there were no unpleasant surprises in the speech and noted that the King had previewed the speech to him on November 21. The King counseled him not to be hot headed in response to his critics. Thaksin replied that as he grew closer to age 60 he would mellow. According to Thaksin, the King's frequent anecdotes during the December 4 speech referring to the Prime Minister had the quality of inside jokes that he and Thaksin shared. Thaksin noted that he had dropped his lawsuits against fervent critic Sondhi Limthongkul. I asked him if this had taken the wind out of Sondhi's sails. Thaksin thought so, saying that the Bangkok elite may be easily duped by a "crook" like Sondhi, but "not for long." He said that he was not the least concerned about Sondhi's next rally on December 9 and ridiculed his claim that half a million Thais would turn out.

Thaksin expressed satisfaction over what he termed a uniformly good relationship with the Palace. He related to me that when he called on the King following his massive 377 seat win last February, he intimated that it would be his last term. "What, you will leave me alone?" Thaksin said the King replied. The Queen also urged that Thaksin see the King regularly, citing his ability to cheer up His Majesty. Thaksin agreed that the King's chief motivation these days is the preservation of the status of the monarchy. He referred humorously to the first time he attended the King's birthday speech as Prime Minister. The King at that time made critical comments about him. While he visibly cringed, Khunying Potjaman (Thaksin's wife) dug him in the ribs with her elbow. The King told him later that he was lucky to have a Khun Potjaman to candidly advise him as well as encourage him. When I asked Thaksin if the Queen was His Majesty's "Khun Potjaman," he said emphatically no. The Palace clearly has two camps, with fundamentally different DNA in each.

Thaksin's confidence was misplaced. A few days later, Boyce met Thai foreign minister Suriakart Sathirathai, a well-connected political operative who was deeply unpopular among the staff who worked for him at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Despite being stunningly underqualified, Suriakart was, with Thaksin's full backing, making a bid to be the next secretary general of the United Nations (the eventual winner, South Korea's Ban-Ki Moon, was hardly a world-beater either). Suriakart knew that the palace

hated Thaksin, and was worried about the status of his UN bid:

Surakiart unexpectedly delivered a downbeat analysis of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's standing in the wake of the King's speech (ref A). Surakiart contradicted Thaksin's rosy view of the speech completely, reinforcing the view that the palace remains unhappy with the PM. Surakiart recognized that Thai Rak Thai (TRT) is still strong, particularly in the countryside, but repeated the adage that "Prime Ministers are elected in the countryside but deposed in Bangkok." He said that rabble-rousing journalist/businessman Sondhi Limthongkhul (ref B) is not the man to lead a successful opposition to Thaksin, but he may continue to plague TRT with his (accurate) revelations of government corruption. Although Surakiart is an opportunist who has hitched his wagon to Thaksin's star, he is also a member of the Bangkok elite, tied into the palace through his wife, the daughter of the King's former principal private secretary and current Privy Counsellor.

At the very outset of our meeting, Deputy Prime Minister Surakiart dismissed Thaksin's contention that the King and the PM had discussed the issues in the King's December 4 speech beforehand and reached an understanding. Surakiart explained that, if the King thought that Thaksin would listen to his private advice, then he would have given it privately. The King had 60 years of experience dealing with prime ministers, and he knew how to handle them. The problem was that Thaksin simply doesn't listen, so the King felt compelled to make his points in a public, albeit typically veiled way. Surakiart also refuted Thaksin's claim that the Queen urged the PM to meet the King regularly to "cheer him up," maintaining that the Queen was also no fan of Thaksin. Overall, Surakiart's view tallied with what we've heard from other sources, that the palace, including the King, still has issues with the Prime Minister. Surakiart leaned toward the view that Thaksin had convinced himself that this was not so, and was just refusing to acknowledge the signs to the contrary.

I pointed out that Thaksin and TRT still have strong support, especially in the countryside. I noted also that the general populace were probably only dimly aware, if at all, of tensions between the beloved monarch and the popular PM, and did not see any need to choose between them. Surakiart acknowledged this, and added that TRT is the first political party to have "two legs" -- support both upcountry and in Bangkok. Nevertheless, Surakiart assessed that the Bangkok elite were now really engaged in opposing Thaksin. He cited the saying, "Prime Ministers are elected in the countryside but deposed in Bangkok," to illustrate the dangers that this development posed for Thaksin.

Surakiart said that the steady opposition to the PM demonstrated by the crowds who turn out to hear Sondhi each week was significant, but that Sondhi himself was not the man to spearhead a successful campaign against Thaksin. However, the King's speech had implicitly absolved Sondhi of any wrongdoing, and forced the PM to drop the lawsuits against him. Sondhi would have to tone down one of his most saleable themes -- defending the "King's prerogatives" -- but he was doing a good business in exposing and highlighting corruption scandals. According to Surakiart, it was clear that Sondhi had excellent sources for these stories, since "everything he's said is true." Given the high levels of corruption in the government, this could be a deep well to draw from, and there was apparently no shortage of sources to dish dirt on the government. For

the next few weeks, Surakiart predicted, political activity would quiet down somewhat as people would be busy with vacations and the new year holiday, but things might pick up around mid-January. (Note: Sondhi announced last Friday that he was taking a break and would be back in mid-January. End note.)

Surakiart's final question shows that even some of the TRT stalwarts are worried. If Thaksin goes down, he asked, "how will it affect my bid to be UN Secretary General?"

[05BANGKOK7732]