



Thailand's Long Endgame: Crises, Coups, Prospects

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Research Seminar

with



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Thailand's Lost Consolidation: Democracy and Monarchy in Transition

Thursday, April 22, 2010

12:00 – 1:30pm

Encina Ground floor conference room (E008)

Lunch will be provided

Please click on this image to RSVP

About the speaker:

Despite its frequent military coups, Thai democracy was practically a textbook case of successful transition during the 1980s and 1990s. A so-called "semi-democracy" during 1980-88 gave way to a fully elected civilian leadership whose corrupt government laid the conditions for a putsch in February 1991. As the coup makers institutionalized their power through the political party and electoral systems, a popular uprising put the military back in the barracks in May 1992. Following an organic five-year constitution-drafting process, the promulgation of the reform-driven 1997 Constitution appeared to cross the threshold between transition and consolidation. But the rise of Thaksin Shinawatra and his Thai Rak Thai party changed all that. The Thaksin regime was paradoxically corrupt and abusive of power on the one hand but delivered the goods from its populist platform through policy innovation on the other. Thaksin triumphed at the polls in 2001 and again, by a landslide, in 2005. In the same year, a Bangkok-based "yellow-shirt" movement campaigned against his graft and abuse, laying the groundwork for Thailand's latest putsch in September 2006. Thai politics has been murky and topsy-turvy since. Thaksin's opponents from the military, palace, Bangkok's middle class, royalist political parties, swathes of civil society, and the yellow-shirted People's Alliance for Democracy are now in charge, fronted by Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva and his Democrat Party-led coalition government. Yet this anti-Thaksin coalition is unable to put the lid on the pro-Thaksin "red shirts" as the remarkable reign of King Bhumibol Adulyadej enters its twilight. Thai democracy and monarchy are increasingly enmeshed. Its road ahead towards a workable constitutional monarchy that is consistent with democratic development will have much to say about the democratization in developing countries. It is a crucial case that could build or sap the momentum of democratization and democracy promotion elsewhere.

Dr. Thitinan Pongsudhirak is Director of the Institute of Security and International Studies (ISIS) and Associate Professor of International Political Economy at the Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University. He has authored a host of articles, books and book chapters on Thailand's politics, political economy, foreign policy, media and ASEAN and East Asian security and economic cooperation. He is frequently quoted and his op-eds have regularly appeared in international and local media. Dr. Thitinan has worked for *The BBC World Service*, *The Economist Intelligence Unit* (EIU), *Independent Economic Analysis* (IDEA) and consulting and research projects related to Thailand's macro-economy and politics. He received his B.A. from the University of California at Santa Barbara, M.A. from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, and Ph.D. from the London School of Economics where he won the United Kingdom's Lord Bryce Prize for Best Dissertation in Comparative and International Politics. Dr. Thitinan has lectured at a host of universities in Thailand and abroad, and is currently a visiting scholar with the FSI-Humanities Center and Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law.



Presentation outline

1. The roots of Thailand's long crisis
2. Restoration: The twin coups of 2006 and 2014
3. An existential search for a new moving balance
4. Global ripple effects
5. Scenarios and prospects



1. The roots of Thailand's long crisis

- A monarchy-centered political order rebuilt and reshaped after 1932-58
- A monarchy-military symbiotic relationship
- A Cold War fighting machine: monarchy, military and bureaucracy
- This political order became a victim of its twin successes: communism at bay + development
- Development and modernization in 1960s-90s culminated with the rise of abusive and astute Thaksin from new elites in early 21st century
- Democratization headway; monarchy holds
- Between loyal subjects and informed citizens



2. Restoration: the twin coups of 2006 and 2014

- The Thai coup cycle and pattern
- The 2006 and 2014 coups in comparison; from half-baked to all-in
- 2014 concentrates power, delegates less, maintains direct control, lockdown
- NCPO Politburo under Gen. Prayut Chan-ocha: interim constitution, National Legislative Assembly, Prime Minister, Cabinet, National Reform Council, Constitution-drafting committee
- Reaction and regression in the face of 21st-century changes and dynamics



3. An existential search for a new moving balance

- No exit from elections and democracy
- International norms, technologies, absence of Cold War, globalisation
- Electoral winners not allowed to rule; losers can't win election; lousy opposition party
- Democratic rule can be manipulated and monopolised (e.g. Thaksin regime)
- Moral authority from unelected sources appears untenable
- A contentious “Thai-style” democracy
- A recalibrated political order is imperative



4. Global ripple effects

- U.S., EU, Australia initial reactions to Thai junta; Japan “in and out”
- China’s and India’s fair-weather
- Mixed ASEAN responses; Indonesia and the Philippines stood up, the rest sat out; esp. Myanmar and Cambodia
- Geopolitics of mainland and maritime Southeast Asia
- Thai coup consequences for Southeast Asia’s democratization; Indonesia, Myanmar, Cambodia, etc.



4. Global ripple effects (cont.)

- Post-coup Thai-US “treaty” relations
- Coup implications for US foreign policy strategy in Asia
- Pivot and rebalance losing credibility?
- US in maritime Southeast Asia (i.e. South China Sea)
- China’s orbit in mainland Southeast Asia
- Thai role in US near-term outlook?



2006



2014



2006



2014



2006



2013/14





2008



2010



2013/14









5. Scenarios and prospects

- Best case: roadmap, policy directions, growth, war on corruption, NCPO maintains integrity with absolute power, new constitution, elections by end-2015, democracy returns, army rests
- Worst case: PM Prayuth, NLA, Cabinet, NRC, CDC institutionalise NCPO power into political/electoral processes; provoke dissent and opposition; arbitrary policy reforms; looming showdown; vacuum; perfect tsunami
- Mixed bag as base case: some anti-corruption; some corruption; nepotism; solid interim growth; NCPO institutionalisation; inevitable showdown
- Reconciling monarchy and democracy; why Thailand is likely to ride out self-inflicted storm