

The Challenge to a Dhammaraja: The Twentieth Thai Coup and the Royal Succession

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The Thai military staged a coup on 22 May 2014, overthrowing the elected government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, sister of Thaksin Shinawatra, Prime Minister from 2001 to 2006. In late 2013, months of relentless protests led by a former MP and Deputy PM from the Democrat Party, Suthep Thaugsuban, who initiated an anti-Yingluck movement under the name, the People’s Democratic Reform Council (PDRC), successfully created a violent context for the military to intervene. Yingluck called for the dissolution of the parliament and an election was held on 2 Feb 2014. But the Constitutional Court intervened and ordered her to step down. Ultimately in May 2014, the military finally staged a coup. The military then led many Thais to believe that this was just another normal coup, primarily to get rid of “corrupt politicians.”

But the objective of this latest coup was more than just eliminating the Yingluck government. The electoral successes since 2001 of the parties controlled by Thaksin initially and then his sister drove the Bangkok elites to find ways to constrain electoral politics. This is particularly crucial at a time when the royal succession is imminent. Indeed, I would argue that the coup was staged primarily for the military and the traditional elites to take control of the royal transition. And in so doing, they aimed at eliminating the Shinawatras before the succession takes place. So far, as I see it, the military will attempt to stay in power for as long as possible, hopefully, once again, to be in charge of the succession. But should the military be forced to step down, perhaps due to domestic or international pressure, it wants to be able to control the political domain. What we are seeing now is that the military is trying to put in place a systemic infrastructure so as to allow the Bangkok elites to manipulate the electoral game, which was in the past decade controlled by the Shinawatras.

I will now focus on the constitution drafting as part of the traditional elites putting such a systemic infrastructure in place. They have striven to take control of the electoral system through rewriting the Constitution, and in particular by preventing an emergence of strong

and popular elected government. The appointed Senate will be the main agent of the elites in weakening any future elected governments. The new charter will also provide the military with a legitimacy to intervene in politics. Even if the junta holds general elections in early 2016, as now promised by Prime Minister Gen Prayuth Chan-ocha, the top military leaders will continue to exert major influence over events. But how?

New Political Structure

In December 2014, the members of the Constitution Drafting Committee revealed that the new charter would allow a non-elected MP to become prime minister. This is certainly a step backwards for Thailand's political development. According to the 1997 Constitution, commonly known as "the people's constitution", a PM must be an elected MP. This was the result of a direct demand from those in the democratic movements in the 1980s and the 1990s who hoped that it would strengthen the country's democratic process and prevent the military from continuing to interfere in politics.

Moreover, the new Constitution, 21st constitution, will give the Senate more power, such as through its ability to propose reform bills, inspect the profiles of nominated cabinet ministers before the forming of a government, and examine the profiles of members of all governmental organizations. In effect, the Senate will serve as an important instrument of the Bangkok elites in protecting their interests. The empowerment of the Senate, once again, goes against the tide of democratization generally in Southeast Asia. In the past, all senators had to be elected. But under the military-sponsored 2007 Constitution, the Senate was only partially elected. The group of unelected, but appointed, senators conspired to make the life of the Yingluck government difficult. However, from the present military-dominated government's point of view, the previous measures were not sufficient: the new constitution will need to give more power to the Senate. As planned, the new constitution could increase the number of senators to 200 (from 150), half of whom will be appointed and the rest "indirectly elected". So far, conjecture about the likely composition of the future Senate suggests that it will be drawn from four groups within the Bangkok elites.

1. Former prime ministers, former court presidents and former House Speakers
2. Senior bureaucrats
3. Representatives of certified professional organizations, such as the Thai Chamber of Commerce and the Medical Council of Thailand
4. Representatives of the civil sector, including agricultural cooperatives, labour unions and people's organizations.

Members of the last group will be "indirectly elected". They will first be "selected or screened" by professional councils before they are eligible to stand for election. In other words, it is fair to claim that they all will be de facto appointed.

On top of this, the new constitution will "downsize" the Lower House by creating a splintered or factionalized parliament, resulting in weak governments. Future MPs will not need to be affiliated with any political parties; therefore the parliament could be filled with independent candidates from small political groupings. This rule will be designed to prevent large and

successful parties like those of Thaksin from coming back to dominating the parliament. Future governments could be formed by weak coalition comprising very different smaller parties with divergent interests. Smaller parties like the pro-establishment Democrat Party could gain the most from this new system.

Finally, the judiciary and other ostensibly independent organizations, such as the National Anti-Corruption Commission and the Election Commission, will continue to serve as political tools for the Bangkok elites. Accordingly, the same double standards in their arbitration of the political system over the last decade or so will most probably continue.

The Military and the Monarchy

Given the systemic infrastructure described above being put into place, it is more than likely that a retired military leader will become Thailand's first post-2016 election prime minister. What is more interesting is the question of whether the National Council for Peace and Order—the governing body of the coup makers—will continue to exist through a continuation of martial law, even after Thailand has a new so-called civilian government. So far, the media have not discussed this possibility and discussion of it is not in the public domain. This is surprising for a continued role for the NCPO and the extension of Martial Law will surely allow the military to intervene in politics and thus take charge of the imminent royal succession. Re-establishing military power in politics is essential for the future of the armed forces, especially when Thailand is at the twilight of the long reign of King Bhumibol Adulyadej. Its claim to be a fierce defender of the monarchy has always been a reason for the military to entrench its position in politics. In return, the endorsement of King Bhumibol has been essential for the military to claim its sovereign legitimacy. But can the military continue to hold on to this role under the next unpopular monarch?

As argued earlier, in my view, the coup was staged in order for the traditional elites to oversee the royal succession, and for its control of the process to succeed, the military has to be in charge and enemies have to be eliminated. Yet, it may be asked, why is the royal succession so crucial for the power holders? In fact, it will be the first “normal succession” since 1925 following the succession of King Prajadhipok (Rama 7). After his reign, there had been a series of abnormal succession, from Rama 7's abdication to the present king's ascension to the throne following the mysterious death of his brother (Rama 8). The present monarch, King Bhumibol (Rama 9), is today the world's longest reigning monarch. Crowned in 1946, Bhumibol was able to transform the monarchy from an unpopular and marginalized institution into becoming the country's most powerful body. But this era is coming to a close. Bhumipol is ill and has been intermittently hospitalised since 2009. His ill health has heightened the Thai public's anxiety over the future of the country without their charismatic King.

Ironically, this anxiety derived mainly from the success of Bhumibol's reign itself. In the past several decades, royal elites and the military embarked on recreating an authoritative persona of Bhumibol to strengthen the monarchy. They elevated the king to a semi-god status, while simultaneously celebrating his reputation as the people-centric monarch. Bhumibol was also extolled as a democratic king. His periodic interventions in politics—most recently in 1992

and 2006—were interpreted as necessary extra-legal initiatives to prevent or end political violence against his legal role as the constitutional monarch being “above politics”.

But the royal transition is happening and far from being a trouble-free process. The construction of a perfect Bhumibol will prove to be a dangerous entrapment for the only heir apparent, Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn. Vajiralongkorn provides an opposing image to that of his father. The inability of Vajiralongkorn to fit in that perfect mould crafted by the palace triggers a public anxiety about Thailand under his future reign. Any attempt to match Bhumibol’s semi-divine persona, moral righteousness, popularity and shrewd political cunning represents a formidable challenge for Vajiralongkorn. These are non-transferable traits and the personal attributes of the present monarch. In this context, given his ostensible lack of the required qualities for kingship, Vajiralongkorn may need to detach himself from politics. Depoliticising the monarchy would be a wise approach for the survival of throne.

But Vajiralongkorn’s recent political interventions suggested otherwise. As a part of his search for a new role in the period leading up to the royal succession, Vajiralongkorn expressed concern about the potential political violence during the anti-Yingluck government protests last year. He summoned Metropolitan Police Chief Police, Lieutenant Kamronwit Thoopkrajang, and advised reaching a solution through dialogue and negotiation. However, the choice of Kamronwit himself was controversial. Kamronwit is known to be a close ally of Thaksin, thus intensifying a rumour of a political alliance between Thaksin and Vajiralongkorn. Consequently, the protestors ignored Vajiralongkorn’s plea.

The role of the military is traditionally crucial in the support of the monarchy. Vajiralongkorn had long been isolated by the military, presumably because of the overwhelming power of King Bhumibol that had effectively eclipsed his own son. To strengthen his position, Vajiralongkorn set up his own quasi-private army—the Ratchawallop—an infantry regiment under his command since 1978. In April 2014, a month before the coup, Vajiralongkorn announced a new recruitment programme to this Corps, hoping to attract men in Thailand’s rural north and northeast region, the heartland of support for the Shinawatra clan. However, the Ratchawallop unit has been unpopular, partly because it was seen as antagonistic towards the national army. Without general support from the top military leadership and the palace, Vajiralongkorn therefore viewed his alliance with Thaksin as strategic. Since Thaksin commanded a popular mandate through successive electoral triumphs, leaning toward Thaksin could mean gaining that same popular support. The evidence was reflected in the gradually growing admiration of the Vajiralongkorn among the red-shirt supporters of Thaksin.

But the 2014 coup has compelled Vajiralongkorn to shift his political alliance. He seemed to have reached out to the military government of Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha to ensure its endorsement of his succession. For example, Vajiralongkorn agreed to preside over the inauguration ceremony of the National Legislative Assembly (NLA) in August 2014, an act deemed to legitimise both the coup itself and the ensuing military regime. So far, Vajiralongkorn has never publicly condemned the coup. Vajiralongkorn also divorced his third wife, Princess Srirasmi, on the grounds that her relatives exploited his name for their benefit. His sudden divorce was seen as a “cleaning-the-house exercise” before the succession takes

place. But have Vajiralongkorn's efforts been enough to earn the support of the royal and military elites?

Conclusion

The prospects for Thailand's democracy at this critical period of royal transition are dim. The Bangkok elites have helped to strengthen the old power, especially the military, and brought them back on to the centre stage of Thai politics. The new Constitution, the new electoral system, the judiciary and the armed forces will help them retain their domination, in this royal transitional period. Thailand will be transformed back into an authoritarian state. The likelihood that the next monarch will be interested in ingratiating himself with the military could further hinder a return to full democratic governance in the Thai kingdom.