Introduction: Understanding Thailand’s Politics

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ABSTRACT

Thailand’s politics from the mid-2000s has seen considerable conflict and contestation, with seven prime ministers, two military coups, and scores of deaths from political violence. This article, as well as introducing the eight articles in the Special Issue, examines various aspects of this tumultuous period and the authoritarian turn in Thai politics. It does this by examining some of the theoretical and conceptual analysis of Thailand’s politics and critiquing the basic assumptions underlying the modernisation and hybrid regimes perspectives that have tended to dominate debates on democratisation. While the concepts of bureaucratic polity and network monarchy shed light on important political actors in Thailand, they have not grappled with the persistence of authoritarianism. In theoretical terms, the article suggests that it is necessary to understand historically specific capitalist development as well as the social underpinnings that establish authoritarian trajectories and reinforce the tenacity of authoritarianism.

KEYWORDS

Authoritarianism; democratisation; hybrid regimes; network monarchy; bureaucratic polity

In a recent foreword to a collection that assessed Thailand’s 2006 military coup, historian Craig Reynolds (2014, ix) commented that “[e]ven in the best of times Thai politics has not been easy to understand, and now, late in the reign of a revered and activist monarch, it is even more difficult to comprehend.” Such observations on the complexity of Thailand’s politics have been made by analysts over several decades.

Why should Thailand’s politics be any more difficult to understand than politics elsewhere? There has certainly been much conflict and contestation over the past 15 years, but is Thailand’s politics so different that the plethora of theories about democratisation, authoritarianism, political change and political conflict are of little explanatory value? This article, as well as introducing recent political events and the articles in this Special Issue, addresses issues related to some of these theoretical approaches and ways of understanding political contestation in Thailand.

Despite possessing a range of supposedly “democratic” institutions such as constitutions, political parties and elections, Thailand’s politics has been marked by multiple military interventions, political mudslinging, spates of violence, a “tradition” of street protests, and repeated civilian uprisings, usually followed by efforts to lay the
foundations of electoral democracy. The political landscape, strewn with discarded constitutions, often seems the preserve of elites doing political deals in back rooms. In this context, the political institutions that have greatest longevity are also the sources of conflict. In these bouts of intense political contestation, the key elements of Thailand’s political struggle have been the military, monarchy, bureaucracy, a powerful capitalist class, a politically active middle class and repressed subaltern classes. As relatively stable elements in the political landscape, these groups have constantly tussled over conceptions of law, representation and political space, often in a context of wide-ranging debates about democracy, constitutions, elections and redistribution. Each of these institutions has been subject to considerable research, theorising and analysis over several decades.

Reynolds’ view of Thailand’s politics as difficult to understand may well have been prompted by the tremendous political tumult of recent years, with seven prime ministers between 2005 and 2016, six draft, interim and permanent constitutions, scores of deaths from political violence and the jailing of hundreds for political acts associated with the ongoing conflict. Adding to this volatile mix, there have been several highly politicised judicial decisions, some notable palace political interventions and seemingly endless street demonstrations, at least until the 2014 military coup. Yet turmoil does not preclude understanding the social forces underpinning these conflicts.

2006 to 2014: A Tale of Two Coups

While this political turmoil began before the military coup of September 2006, it was this putsch and another in May 2014 that marked the terrain of a decade of conflict. In 2008, the Journal of Contemporary Asia produced a Special Issue on Thailand examining the 2006 coup. The introduction to that issue reflected on an intervention that some welcomed as a “good coup.” The articles in that issue revolved around topics of democracy, elections, social movements, populism, military and monarchy. The intent was to understand the “Thaksin [Shinawatra] ascendancy…[and] its ideological, class and institutional base, the oppositional movements that took shape against it, and the forces that eventually overthrew it” (Connors and Hewison 2008, 9).

Towards the end of their introduction to that Special Issue, Connors and Hewison (2008, 9) intimated that Thailand’s ruling class was concerned that the changes made by the 1997 constitution had resulted in an electoral system that appeared to threaten the extant social and political order. For some in what is now usually identified as the royalist elite, that the electoral system was producing overwhelming majorities for Thaksin’s political party was cause for questioning electoral democracy. The fear that Thaksin could establish both political and economic domination did much to generate support for the 2006 coup. Anti-Thaksin street demonstrations saw the People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD) express a developing disillusionment with electoral and democratic politics, and the choice of wearing yellow shirts showing support for the monarchy also represented a questioning of majoritarianism. From a vantage point following the 2014 military coup, that disillusionment soon became strong opposition to elections as posing an existential threat to an elite-dominated social order. This opposition has been an important element motivating political reaction.
Part of the reason for that opposition to elections was that the 2006 coup did not achieve the results coup planners and their yellow-shirted supporters had hoped for. One major “failure” was the heightened politicisation of the monarchy. Initially hailed as a “good coup,” the palace’s role in support of the military intervention was clear and public. Whereas the palace had hoped that its role would be seen as supporting a “popular” military intervention, the result was that many came to be see the palace as irrevocably partisan and politicised. Equally important in defining “failure,” when the military seized power, its supporters expected the junta to remove Thaksin and his party from politics through constitutional and electoral system changes that would prevent a Thaksin return and facilitate elite control of electoral politics. Several changes were made, showcased in the 2007 constitution, drawn up under military tutelage. This charter sought to increase the power and reach of the judiciary and other check-and-balance or “independent” institutions, moving authority away from elected politicians and curbing their power and authority. At the same time, the military increased its power, with, for example, the new Defence Ministry Law stripping the prime minister of the power to determine military reshuffles. For those opposed to Thaksin, while the 1997 constitution was considered an important innovation, his electoral popularity and parliamentary dominance was seen as promoting nepotism and corruption. The lesson drawn from 2006 was that to defeat him more further and more extensive constitutional rejigging was necessary to prevent a monopolisation of parliament and politics by Thaksin, “Thaksin clones” or any other elected politician.

Under the junta and the subsequent military-backed government in 2006–07, efforts were made to destroy Thaksin and his party. A series of corruption and malfeasance cases were investigated and charges against Thaksin, his wife and relatives ensued. The judiciary promptly dissolved Thaksin’s Thai Rak Thai (TRT) Party and banned 111 of its leaders and former parliamentarians from participating in electoral politics for five years. These constitutional and legal restrictions certainly weakened Thaksin and TRT. However, as a measure of the perceived failure of the 2006 coup, these actions did not prevent an electoral victory for the pro-Thaksin People’s Power Party in December 2007.

A renewed effort to banish Thaksin and his parties took place in late 2008. Following a long period of street-based agitation by the PAD, still a loose confederation of anti-Thaksin and pro-royalist groups, the increasingly activist judiciary intervened to dismiss the elected government before dissolving the People’s Power Party and several of its coalition partners, while banning another swathe of politicians from participating in electoral politics for five years. In this “judicial coup,” parliament was not prorogued, and with some murky political manoeuvres involving the military, the Democrat Party’s Abhisit Vejjajiva was proposed and elected prime minister by a parliament reduced by the bans on pro-Thaksin politicians. Supported by the military, Abhisit’s government remained in power from 2008 to 2011, all the time facing extensive opposition from pro-Thaksin groups, soon identified as “red shirts” and associated with the United Democratic Front Against Dictatorship.

The processes that brought Abhisit to power were considered undemocratic by many Thaksin supporters, and a series of efforts by red shirts began to resist military and elite interference in politics and in support of a fresh election. Massive protest rallies by red shirts in 2009 and 2010 resulted in the army being used to defeat them, resulting in considerable loss of life and injuries. Even so, when the Abhisit government did call an
election in 2011, it was Thaksin’s politically inexperienced youngest sister, Yingluck Shinawatra, who led her Pheu Thai Party to yet another pro-Thaksin electoral landslide.

Yingluck, her brother and their advisers appeared to settle on a political strategy that sought to appease the palace and allowed the military to look after its own affairs. They seemed to consider that these concessions would mean that the government would be left to implement its election promises without interference from the military-monarchy alliance (see Chambers and Napisa 2016). Pheu Thai’s political aims seemed more likely to be achieved through compromise, by moderating radical demands and reducing opposition and, for a time, it seemed to work. When royalist opponents sniped about “populism” and occasionally demonstrated against alleged corruption, disloyalty to the monarchy and for being at Thaksin’s beck and call, the government was not seriously challenged and Yingluck seemed determined that her administration remain in place and seek re-election (see Hewison 2012). Importantly, the government sought to avoid the street demonstrations and conservative elite opposition that destabilised previous pro-Thaksin administrations.

The continuing electoral successes of pro-Thaksin political parties provoked further, legal and parliamentary contestation that led to more violence. Political debate whirled around notions of electoral versus elite perspectives on democracy, popular versus limited representation and the political roles of institutions such as the judiciary, military and monarchy. PAD’s remnants joined with several other anti-Thaksin and royalist groups and coagulated into the anti-democratic “People’s Committee for Absolute Democracy with the King as Head of State” in late 2013. Its name conveyed the notion that the political contest was between moral royalists opposed to corrupt, elected politicians. The English name was later changed to the People’s Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) to distance the movement from the palace and to give the impression that it was pursuing popular democratic reform. Initially, the PDRC gained political traction when the Yingluck government introduced an ill-considered amnesty bill that would have included Thaksin. Even though that bill was withdrawn, the PDRC’s street protests gathered momentum, adopting a rhetoric that opposed electoral politics and paving the way for the May 22, 2014 coup.

The PDRC developed around a plethora of anti-Thaksin figures and came to be led by Democrat Party stalwart and former deputy prime minister Suthep Thaugsuban. He was surrounded by other Democrat Party politicians, royalists and business figures who rejected Yingluck and her government as well as the exiled Thaksin. Much of the support for the PDRC came from the Bangkok middle classes and from the Democrat Party’s strong electoral base in the south (see Baker 2016).

The PDRC’s mobilisations had several consistent and inter-related themes: anti-corruption, protection of the monarchy and a rejection of electoral politics. Anti-corruption was attractive to a middle class that tended to subscribe to the royalist ideological weaving of arguments that civilian politicians are corrupt, gaining election through “money politics” and “policy corruption,” and using the electoral system to maintain their power and increase their wealth (see Veerayooth 2016). Elected politicians were identified as wholly untrustworthy, voters could be bought, were duped or ignorant, and therefore electoral politics was the core of the corruption problem (see Thongchai 2008; Thorn 2016). Since 2006, the theme of protecting the monarchy has been intensified. Royalists and the military made the monarchy a central element of
national security and the lèse-majesté law was used extensively (see Streckfuss 2011). While the Democrat Party administration had used the draconian law against political opponents, usually red shirts, even the Yingluck government, under pressure from royalists and the military, processed numerous cases.

By the time of the PDRC’s mobilisation, the theme of rejecting electoral politics had become a significant feature for all those opposing Thaksin. On the streets, the PDRC campaigned against elections, declaring that they only resulted in a “parliamentary dictatorship.” This anti-election language led to opposition to a poll called for early 2014 and that saw a campaign to block voter registration and assaults on voters as the PDRC violently boycotted the elections (see Prajak 2016). The PDRC repeatedly claimed that elected politicians were the root cause of the national malaise.

The elections prevented, the PDRC demanded that the Yingluck government be thrown out, replaced by an appointed government and an appointed reform committee to ensure the so-called Thaksin regime was uprooted. It was argued that elections are just one aspect of democracy and that pro-Thaksin governments engaged in “majoritarianism,” riding rough-shod over the minority that did not vote for them. In essence, the PDRC opposed elections as anti-democratic and leading to “parliamentary authoritarianism.” Those who opposed the PDRC argued that elections were an essential element of representative democracy.

The months of PDRC demonstrations and associated violence destabilised but did not succeed in dislodging the Yingluck government. As in 2008, the judiciary intervened and removed Yingluck from the prime ministership, but even this did not officially spell the end of her government, and eventually it was the military, egged on by the PDRC and others, that dissolved the government in a coup on May 22, 2014.

In line with the PDRC’s anti-electoralism, the junta claimed its coup was an act to strengthen “democracy”:

[the] NCPO [the military junta] and all Thai citizens uphold and have faith in the democratic system with His Majesty the King as Head of State. [The] NCPO fully realizes that the military intervention may be perceived by the West as a threat to democracy and a violation of the people’s liberty. However, this military intervention was inevitable, in order to uphold national security and to strengthen democracy (Government Public Relations Department 2014, emphasis added).

The junta declared that sovereignty was with the monarch rather than the people or parliament:

In the name of His Majesty the King…royal power [was presented] to us; today who among us considers this? From the point of view of the government, you are using the three powers [ie. legislative, executive and judicial power] which belong to Him. The power does not belong to you. You do not receive this power when you are elected. It is power that comes from His Majesty the King. His Majesty presented this power to us to form the government. Today, the power that I have was presented to me by the King (General Prayuth Chan-ocha, cited in Jory 2014, 3).

The 2014 coup was bloodless, and learning from one of the 2006 “failures,” the junta attempted to distance its intervention from the palace. Significantly, the military leadership had also learnt that it could not intervene and hand over to a puppet civilian regime, as it had in 2006, and hope that a civilian government would uproot the
“Thaksin regime.” After the 2014 coup, the military junta maintained its control of government and engaged in a widespread suppression of opposition that involved the use of military and police power, martial law, special decrees and the further expansion of the draconian lèse-majesté law.1 The military junta appointed puppet assemblies meant to establish a constitution that would, more effectively than in 2007, expunge Thaksin’s political popularity and end his various parties’ electoral successes. This involved measures to undermine the parliament’s capacity to make policy and other legislative decisions and to limit the ability of political parties to develop policies and promises to the electorate. The junta also attempted to shape society to its “12 core values of the Thai people” that all school children are required to recite, reflecting a view of an idealised past when Thais were said to be passive and orderly. With the 2014 coup, the struggle over the shape and control of political, economic and social power has entered a new phase.

For this Special Issue, Thailand’s political tumult and the 2014 military coup provide an opportunity to more thoroughly consider the persistence of authoritarianism and offer reflections on Thailand’s conservative regime. Among other things, we ask: How have the processes of democratisation been stymied? How can we make sense of Thailand’s authoritarian persistence and engage it with theoretical and comparative debates over democracy and authoritarianism?

Making Sense of Political Tumult: From Bureaucratic Polity to Network Monarchy

Thailand’s political landscape has not been particularly fertile in developing the conceptual and theoretical tools for understanding the events of recent years or the long-standing debates regarding democracy and representation (see Ferrara 2015; Hewison 2015). There have been, however, some notable innovations. In earlier times, the most widely used description of Thai politics was of a bureaucratic polity. Developed by Riggs (1966), the bureaucratic polity was, in fact, far more than a descriptive category; it was a theoretically sophisticated concept nested in a notion of a prismatic society, eschewing the unilinear and evolutionary approach of early modernisation theory. Riggs argued that Thailand’s development was not towards political modernity but was a system where differentiation was limited to the bureaucracy and where alternative power centres such as business were insecure and dependent. As might be expected, this approach paid little attention to extra-bureaucratic struggles over democracy or representation, treating the polity as a site of political competition between revolving bureaucratic elites (see Hewison 1989, 8–13). While it is true that Thailand’s elites are powerful, a focus on them means that broader struggles for political space by workers, peasant farmers, middle classes and others are necessarily diminished.

Half a century later, some of these latter observations can be seen to also apply to the most widely used descriptive category of Thailand’s post-2006 politics, McCargo’s network monarchy. This concept is not as carefully and theoretically defined as bureaucratic polity, but it has been widely used to label Thailand’s elite politics. McCargo’s innovation that was widely taken up was that he named and identified Thailand’s leading political network, associated with the king and centred on former prime minister and current Privy Council President, General Prem Tinsulanonda. Prem is
portrayed as working through proxies such as other privy councillors, trusted military leaders and major business figures to ensure the palace’s political preferences were heeded. McCargo’s approach has the great virtue of throwing an analytical and explanatory light on the role of the monarchy and on the shadowy elite centred on the palace and said to be pulling the political strings.²

McCargo (2005, 500) argued that Thailand’s political order is characterised by network-based politics, with the monarchy controlling the superior and most politically significant network. He linked his approach with a notion of “network governance.” In so doing, he was initially seeking to explain a resurgence of separatist violence in Thailand’s southernmost provinces. He argued that the “dominant mode of governance used in Thailand since 1980 may best be termed monarchical network governance, or network monarchy” (McCargo 2006, 42). The advantage of McCargo’s focus is that when his lens was turned to national politics, it acknowledged the monarchy’s central political position. Like others who viewed political conflict as stemming from competing elites, McCargo (2006, 43) argued that it was Thaksin and his brand of electoral politics and his determination to secure “control of the entire country through tightly managed personal networks” that challenged the monarchy’s preferred “loose alliances” and its network.

For McCargo (2005, 501), “[n]etwork monarchy is a form of semi-monarchical rule…,” making it “inherently illiberal because it advocates reliance on ‘good men’, and the marginalization of formal political institutions or procedures.” This illiberalism means that “[l]ow priority is given to democratic principles…”, with the network monarchy having close ties with conservative and rightist groups. At the same time, McCargo suggests that royalist “liberals” have found the network useful in “the crafting of a liberal polity.” In essence, then, the network monarchy has been “flexible and ultimately pragmatic” (McCargo 2005, 502). At the same time, McCargo (2005, 516) considered the network monarchy’s time was up: “By the beginning of Thaksin’s second term of office, the informal political system of network monarchy that had operated… for three decades looked close to exhaustion.” He was wrong. In fact, the groups he identifies with the network monarchy were energised by the rise of Thaksin and became united in opposition to pro-Thaksin governments.

In referring to “network governance,” McCargo was joining with a well-established literature in policy studies and political science where its application developed within a pluralist tradition (see Klijn and Koppenjan 2012, 587–590). However, McCargo (2005, 501) is not particularly explicit or detailed about his concept and its relationship with either pluralist or network governance literatures, except for a passing mention of Robert Dahl. The result is that “network monarchy” remains an evocative term that lends itself to a descriptive analysis of Thailand’s politics, but with little theoretical or conceptual development.

Even so, in terms of both the events from about 2005 and the widespread adoption of the terminology, network monarchy became a conventional wisdom amongst Thailand and Southeast Asia specialists. It was used to describe: the political forces underpinning anti-Thaksin movements (see Ferrara 2011; Pavin 2014; Thongchai 2014); the failure of civilians to establish control over the military (Croissant 2015); and judicial activism (Dressel and Mietzner 2012). Interestingly, the concept has been taken up widely in Thai studies beyond politics, in analysing Brahmanical symbolism and royal absolutism.
(Jackson 2009) and even Thailand’s tourism (Cohen and Neal 2010). In addition to scholarly research, network monarchy has had a strong influence in the media where the concept has been used as shorthand for the power of those close to the monarchy.

Without doubt, the palace’s role in politics has been more widely acknowledged following its ill-judged association with the planning and support for the 2006 military coup. In studies of Thailand’s post-2006 politics, Ünaldi (2014) and Harris (2015) have attempted to shift the network focus somewhat, from those close to the monarchy to other groups of political actors. Whereas Harris (2015) gives attention to other autonomous political networks, Ünaldi (2014) uses Weberian concepts to focus on cross-class social actors who “work towards the monarchy,” advancing their own individual or collective interests. Some of those “working towards the monarchy” presumably include members of the network monarchy but also others who are not part of the royal circle such as small-scale entrepreneurs and even slum dwellers living on the crown’s land.

Moving beyond network monarchy, the applicability of network governance for understanding Thailand’s politics is not especially obvious. The approach is associated with institutionalism and the horizontal governance of economic relations. The literature on network governance is mainly about liberal democracies, with pluralist roots in notions of interest mediation and is largely based in notions of positive relationships across the network (Borzel 2011, 49–51; Ansell 2006, 77, 85). These roots and applications have little resonance for Thailand’s politics. As Dredge (2006, 567) observes for network governance more broadly, networks are notoriously difficult to define and delineate. For Thailand, while Harris (2015) has done this for the influential network of health professionals, McCargo does not delineate the network monarchy’s boundaries or provide details of its membership. By concentrating on the network monarchy, not unlike the approach taken by Riggs (1966) in focussing on the bureaucratic polity, the analytical focus is directed to the elite. This focus allows little room for those outside elite networks to contest, resist or struggle. Hence, political contestation is largely understood as taking place merely between elite networks. Both structure and agency questions are insufficiently analysed in this approach and the political, social and economic location of the network monarchy is not detailed.

As noted above, McCargo considers the network monarchy to be politically pragmatic, allowing “liberals” to be incorporated. In this context it is reasonable to ask whether a focus on network monarchy advances our understanding of the remarkable persistence of authoritarianism in Thailand. With military interventions in 2006 and 2014, and the embedding of military authoritarianism, it seems opportune to consider approaches that attempt to explain the tenacity of authoritarianism. The retrograde events of the past decade also suggest the need for deeper reflection on the nature of Thailand’s conservative regime and how democratic development has been thwarted. Network monarchy, with its emphasis on a particular elite structure, is insufficient for delineating the manifold sites of political contestation that are critical for understanding the nature of the country’s politics and its trajectory.

The topics addressed in this Special Issue revolve around these broader issues and questions through a series of case studies and analyses that reveal more about the social and economic foundations as well as the institutional and ideological struggles that underpin the strength of authoritarianism, as well as the conflict and contestation over political power. In introducing these articles, we first turn to some of the contributions of the broader theoretical literature.
Modernisation, Hybrid Regimes and Beyond

The early literature on democratisation, drawing extensively on modernisation perspectives, concentrated on identifying factors that would unleash political liberalisation and lead to democracy. The critical factors identified were socio-economic conditions, most often associated with the development of capitalism, increasing levels of education, rapid industrialisation and rising incomes (see Lipset 1959; Rostow 1960). Later approaches, enthusiastic about Huntington’s (1991) “third wave of democratisation,” and developing as “transition theory,” traced democratisation to factors that enhanced elite bargain and compromise. In its more vulgar forms, this approach tended to assume that transitions to democracy were more or less inevitable once the right conditions were in place (see Rustow 1970; O’Donnell and Schmitter 1986; Huntington 1991). Considerable effort was spent on delineating these conditions for successful democratisation. Measuring democracy involved essentially establishing a checklist of the appropriate institutions and practices while regimes could be allocated a place on the road to democracy as the preferred regime type. These approaches, however, tended to suffer from their normative presumption that democracy was the ultimate destination of all developing countries.3

From the modernisation perspective, authoritarianism became little more than a residual category, measured by the absence of the attributes and institutions of the checklist of transition prerequisites. In this sense, an authoritarian polity becomes an essentially unnatural regime, one that is impeded from making the necessary transition to democracy.

Even in the sophisticated account by Tilly (2007), which, despite deeming democratisation in the West a long and contingent process – and certainly not linear – the capacity for authoritarianism to be maintained and renovated without a transition to democracy tends to be overlooked. Tilly (2007, 59) defines democratisation as a movement towards “broad, equal, protected, mutually binding consultation…” and acknowledges the possibility of de-democratisation, explained as a movement towards “narrower, more unequal, less protected, and less mutually binding consultation.” Notably, Tilly’s de-democratisation remains defined by democratisation, with authoritarianism left undefined. While a starting point for the path to democracy, authoritarianism remains a residual category. Clearly, Thailand’s rapid industrialisation has not led to a political transition to democratic politics and authoritarianism remains entrenched.

Reflecting a recognition of unfinished or incomplete democratic transitions, one fruitful conceptualisation that emerged from about the early 2000s has been the recognition and discussion of “hybrid regimes.” This discussion emerged from an acknowledgement that the transitions literature, through its use of normative models, did not reckon with the potential for “competitive” and “non-competitive” authoritarianism as a regime type. In recognising this potential, Levitsky and Way (2010) and other hybrid regime theorists consider the persistence of authoritarian government, identifying and classifying regimes as democratic, competitive authoritarian and fully authoritarian. Importantly, they note that authoritarian regimes may be stable and entrenched, recognising that they are not necessarily in transition to democratic politics. Another strand of analysis focuses more directly on the durability of
authoritarian regimes. This literature argues that the persistence of such regimes has involved an accommodation with some of the political institutions most usually associated with liberal democracies, in particular, elections and political parties. Singapore and Malaysia are among the main cases used in this literature to demonstrate how elites purposefully utilise these institutions to consolidate their hold on power and to maintain authoritarian regimes (see Geddes 2003; Brownlee 2007; Gandhi 2008).

Thailand is not a good “fit” with either hybrid regimes or authoritarian durability approaches. As Slater (2010, 241) has it, for the period to about 1992, Thailand’s politics has been characterised by fragmentation, seen in “a weak state, a factionalized military, weak parties, and wobbly dictatorships…” While we do not agree with all elements of this characterisation, the fact remains that, for Thailand, authoritarianism has been able to persist despite the absence of institutions such as strong political parties. Rather, for several decades, while witnessing considerable economic development, the country has undergone several shifts to electoral regimes, each time seeing these overthrown by a military putsch – identified by Chai-Anan (1982) as the “vicious cycle of Thai politics.” This cycle has made it clear that two of the most cherished assumptions of the modernisation-cum-hybrid regimes literature have not held. First, the middle classes have not taken on its supposed liberalising role, nurturing democratic politics. In fact, Thailand’s urban middle classes seem to have become anti-democratic in recent years. Second, there has not been an elite compromise with subaltern demands that might consolidate a democratic transition.

In theoretical terms, hybrid regime theory describes authoritarianism without providing an “explanation of why and how regimes take the forms they do” (Jayasuriya and Rodan 2007, 775). Nor does it reveal much about the social underpinnings that favour a persistence of authoritarian regimes, as has been the case in Thailand where authoritarian politics has been entrenched. More importantly, both hybrid regimes and authoritarian durability approaches are highly influenced by the “institutional turn” in comparative politics being focused on the role of formal institutions such as elections, constitutions and political parties (see Pepinsky 2014), but missing broader contestation between different social forces as well as the role of informal institutions that have been part and parcel of Thailand’s political economy. Even where formal institutions have been important, this literature tends to view them as being independent of the broader power struggles. In Thailand, as elsewhere, formal institutions are a locus of political struggle and are shaped by these contests. Recognition of this is arguably one reason why the network monarchy concept has been widely adopted.

Another approach that takes durable authoritarianism and broader power structure and social conflicts seriously is proposed by Jayasuriya and Rodan (2007). They argue that: “Political regimes...need to be identified in terms of the relationship between institutions and the management, amelioration or containment of conflict,” where conflict “refers to the struggle for access to and the distribution of political resources, authority, and legitimacy” (Jayasuriya and Rodan 2007, 775). This perspective drives attention away from the fetishisation of political institutions and directs it to the “the relationship between institutions and the way conflict is organized and structured through...modes of political participation” that are defined “as the engagement or contestation by individuals and groups over who gets what, when and how...”
An aspect of their approach that merits attention, and reminds us of Tilly (2007), is the view that the social forces that underpinned democratic transitions in Western Europe are largely missing in Southeast Asia due to earlier periods of repression of labour movements, political parties and other elements of civil society. This means that late-industrialisers experience capitalist development based on quite different social foundations than those seen in the West. For Jayasuriya and Rodan (2012, 176), their approach begins with an “examination of the historical conditions of capitalist development and its implications for alliances and conflicts affecting political regime possibilities.” The outcomes of these alliances and conflicts shape politics, regime possibilities and the nature of institutions. Indeed, institutions are sites of contestation. In this approach, the emphasis is “not on the effectiveness and/or cohesiveness of political and state institutions but on understanding the social and political relationship that underpins them.” This emphasis means that analysts may consider “a range of regime trajectories – not just the prospects or otherwise for the flourishing of democratic institutions” (Rodan and Jayasuriya 2012, 176).

In this perspective, an authoritarian regime can have longevity and is not necessarily a starting point or a temporary wayside on the way to a democratic polity. This means that the nature of social forces that give rise to authoritarianism and which maintain authoritarian regimes need to be understood as a way to conceptualising the characteristics and institutions of authoritarian regimes. In the Thai context, this approach would, for example, require not so much an analysis of the network monarchy, but of the contending social forces and class conflict that produced a political situation that permitted a reinvigoration of royalist discourse, the strengthening of rightist and anti-democratic politics and the circumstances that permitted a group associated with the monarchy to become politically significant.

Following this lead, it can be agreed that institutions are important. But all institutions are subject to the dynamics of the deeper power structure and struggle that underpins them. In this light, characterising the type of regime is less significant than identifying the nature and sites of contestation. While the articles constituting this Special Issue cannot provide a comprehensive analysis, they revolve around these broader issues and questions through a series of case studies and analyses that reveal more about the social and economic foundations as well as the institutional and ideological struggles that underpin the conflict and democratisation, as well as the conflict and contestation over political power.

The Articles

The articles in this Special Issue explicitly place contestation at the centre of their analyses and seek to understand the ways in which these shape institutions such as the monarchy, military, judiciary, elections, political participation and civil society organisations. In examining these institutions, the contests that shape them range from “post-peasants” seeking representation and struggles over distribution to elite-level discursive struggles over the meaning of democracy and representation.

In the first article in this Special Issue, Chris Baker (2016) makes the point that Thailand was, following the 2014 coup, the only country in the world ruled by a junta-installed
government. His article examines some of the historical antecedents of the country’s most recent authoritarian turn. Taking a historical approach and identifying three pillars of the old establishment – the monarchy, military and bureaucracy – Baker explains how these have remained strong and developed justifications for their own legitimacy which challenge democratic principles. When combined with the power of Sino-Thai tycoons, this establishment constellation vigorously defends the principle of oligarchy. It was also taken up by official and professional elites and the mostly Bangkok-based middle class, a point also taken up by Veerayooth (2016). The alliance of these forces paved the way for a coup that, while apparently aimed at removing the influence of Thaksin and his “regime,” is shifting Thailand’s politics in a deeply authoritarian direction.

Interestingly, in quite different ways, inequality has been taken up by opponents of the traditional elite as well as by the military regime when it has promoted “reform.” All sides appear to have noticed that Thailand’s long-standing inequality has political ramifications (see Hewison 2014). While the military regime has favoured repression over any substantive attention to the issue, its opponents have emphasised long-standing exploitation. Taking up the notion of oligarchy and politics, Pasuk Phongpaichit (2016) examines wealth and inequality. In Thailand, although the high level of income inequality has eased slightly since 2000, it remains high by international comparisons. Significantly, there remains a “1% problem” as peak incomes in Thailand are growing faster than the average. Using newly available data, Pasuk shows that the inequality of wealth is very high. These high levels of wealth are concentrated at the top end of the business community. Following the 1997 crisis there was significant concentration within Thai corporate groups. Those at the top end have also increased their control of rents and financial assets. New data show that the average income of the 220 members of the junta’s National Legislative Assembly is 32 times the average per capita income. Thomas Piketty (2014) found roughly the same multiple between aristocrats and people in ancien regime Europe. Such a legislature is unlikely to take any action to close the economic and social divide. Pasuk observes that in a society with high inequality, elites stand to lose from majoritarian politics and thus oppose democratisation and suggests that opposition to Thaksin may have reflected this.

Paul Chambers and Napisa Waitoolkiat (2016) examine Thailand’s armed forces. They argue that conventional notions of why Thailand’s military intervenes so regularly in politics need to be re-examined. Instead of examining its material and institutional interests – such as protecting military economic resources of control over decision-making – they argue for attention to the relationship between monarchy and military. This relationship is said to represent a “parallel state” in terms of political decision-making while the attention to ideology, rituals and processes within this relationship results in a military that has been “monarchised.” The purpose of this relationship is to sustain a palace-preferred conservative political and social order while delivering considerable legitimacy to the military. Whereas the military’s 1991 coup and its associated crackdown on protesters resulted in political disgrace, the support from and alliance with the monarchy has resulted in a rehabilitation of the military’s political role. With the king and the monarchy’s guardian-in-chief at the Privy Council, General Prem, having aged, Chambers and Napisa argue that the balance in the “monarchised military” has clearly shifted to the latter. The military junta that came to power in 2014 is obviously embedding this status.
Where Chambers and Napisa refer to a parallel state, Eugénie Mérieau (2016) develops the concept of a Deep State, challenging the network monarchy approach. Like the network monarchy, the Deep State has the monarchy as its keystone, but the Deep State is far more institutionalised than the network monarchy. Like the network monarchy, it is an intensely anti-democratic alliance. Using material from constitution-drafting processes in 1997 and 2007, Mérieau argues that the Deep State has been manoeuvring the Constitutional Court into a position where it may act as a “surrogate king,” seeking to constitutionalise the king’s role through the Constitutional Court for a post-Bhumibol era. The capacity of King Bhumibol to intervene to protect a conservative political and social order has passed and constitution drafters have been seeking ways to make judges “above” politics and to allocate them special powers to solve any “political crisis” that threatens this order. Mérieau suggests that this process must be understood as an attempt to institutionalise the Deep State to protect it from the challenges of both democratisation and royal succession.

In his article, Prajak Kongkirati (2016) examines the fragility and contested nature of Thailand’s politics. Noting a lack of consensus around the “rules of the game” among elites and various social groups, he argues that the politics is volatile and the country is unstable. One reflection of this has been the nature and incidence of violence associated with electioneering. Examining the failed February 2, 2014 elections and comparing it with other elections, Prajak observes a significant change in the pattern and extent of electoral violence. In other elections, there were targeted killings among rival candidates but in 2014, the violence was meant to prevent the election rather than influence an outcome. Urban middle class protesters, mobilised as the PDRC, employed violence to disrupt electoral voter registration, voting and vote counting. The PDRC’s animosity towards the election was unprecedented. By disrupting the election, it rejected the peaceful and democratic way for the public to decide who should govern. The PDRC case demonstrated that activities of a confrontational civil society can cause the deadly conflicts and lead to a breakdown of electoral democracy, raising questions about the assumed democratic nature of the middle classes.

An outcome of the 1997 constitution was the development of unelected bodies designed to discipline elected politicians and political parties. However, despite growing recognition of the role of the judicial bodies (see Mérieau 2016), existing studies have yet to establish how these constitutional innovations affected the incentives for the supposedly non-partisan actors populating the so-called independent agencies. Veerayooth Kanchoochat (2016) argues that such institutional reconfigurations have perversely consolidated the incentive for the professional and official elite who consider themselves to be prospective candidates to “reign” in these agencies. His article develops the concept of “reign-seeking” to explain how and why these unconventional political actors – academics, doctors and business community leaders – made collective efforts to topple the elected government in exchange for gaining selection into the wide range of unelected bodies. The changing incentives of these actors are intertwined with neoliberal governance reform driven by a desire for depoliticisation and the minimisation of rent-seeking. But in Thailand governance reform has been redefined to mean the creation of oversight agencies staffed by morally conservative minds, thereby reinforcing the status quo and manifesting the dominance of moral ideologies over liberal and democratic principles.
In his article, Somchai Phatharathananunth (2016) turns attention to the rural north-east of Thailand, often considered one of the “heartland” areas of support for Thaksin and his various parties. Rural dwellers have been identified as either an uneducated mass led by dangerous politicians or as Thaksin loyalists. Somchai suggests a more complicated and nuanced view of change and politics in the region. Following the 2006 military coup villagers in this region played an important anti-coup role and actively and repeatedly demanded democratic rule, opposed military intervention and challenged elites. Somchai presents the view that democratic progress in rural areas reflects underlying economic, social and political processes. The coup was a landmark event in terms of the ways in which the rural masses challenged the hierarchical social order. To comprehend this, Somchai examines the extensive structural changes in Thailand’s countryside that have resulted in villagers being released from traditional bonds, enabling them to engage in new forms of political mobilisation. It is contended that the emergence of a democratic movement in the rural northeast results from two important and closely related processes: rural socio-economic transformations and political democratisation.

The final article in this Special Issue is by Thorn Pitidol (2016) and focuses on civil society organisations. Whereas the democratisation literature identifies a vibrant civil society and associated non-governmental organisations as important for building democratic societies, Thorn shows that some of these organisations have contributed to the country’s democratic regression. His article explores the contested political positions associated with redefined meanings of democracy. By examining a network of development actors associated with a highly influential organisation, the Community Organisation Development Institution, or CODI, the democratic discourses that prevail within Thailand’s civil society and their political implications of them are explained. CODI’s “democratic” discourses are associated with a preoccupation with collective identity, defined through civil society’s communitarian vision and the desire to promote “collective virtues.” Yet such discourses are shown to limit the democratic potential of civil society by facilitating connections between civil society and conservative elites, embedding moral notions and a hierarchical organisational culture emphasising the role of “good people.” In this context, issues of representation, elections and voting are seen as corrupted and corrupting. The result is support for political models that are moralistic and supportive of authoritarian leadership.

Notes

1. The non-governmental organisation iLaw has kept track of known junta arrests, detentions and charges. It reports that by December 2015, at least 829 people were summoned to report to or “visited” by the authorities at his/her home or workplace, 506 individuals had been arrested for political crimes, 62 were charged with lèse majesté, 35 were charged with sedition and 155 civilians had been tried in a military court (http://freedom.ilaw.or.th/en#).

2. There is now a considerable literature on the monarchy and politics. In addition to works already cited in this article, among some of the important contributions in English are: Connors (2011), Fong (2009), Gray (1986), Handley (2006), Hewison (1997; 2008) and Marshall (2014).

3. There are some important exceptions. For example, Almond and Powell (1966, 217, 255–298) argued that a movement towards a modern state involved a political transition that could be to modern systems that could be democratic or authoritarian.
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