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What is to Come in Thailand?

By Michael J. Montesano*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The elections of 2 February 2014 have deepened Thailand's crisis, as efforts to mount a "judicial coup" against the Yinglak government gather pace.
- Yinglak's ouster would risk provoking a violent backlash on the part of her supporters.
- In a longer-term perspective, the Thai crisis is about fundamental changes in Thailand's social and political order and about uncertainty concerning the future of the monarchy.
- Failure to accommodate recent social and political changes is not a viable option for the Thai political system.
- Worries over the future of the monarchy reflect a lack of imagination among leading royalists.

**Michael J. Montesano is Visiting Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies; e-mail: michaelmontesano@iseas.edu.sg. This piece is a revised version of remarks on "Thailand in 2014: Signs of Things to Come?" delivered at the 2014 ISEAS Regional Outlook Forum (ROF), 9 January 2014, Singapore. He has benefitted from the insights of Patrick Jory, Duncan McCargo, and Matthew Wheeler in the preparation of this piece.*

INTRODUCTION

Thailand's success in mounting elections on 2 February, in the face of a determined campaign of obstruction and occasional intimidation, has only served to intensify its political troubles. But, no matter how the current, extremely grave, phase of the long-running political conflict in the country plays out, a pair of issues will shape Thai developments for the remainder of 2014 and in the foreseeable future. The first relates to the transformed social and political order that now obtains in Thailand, and the second to the looming royal succession and the future of the Thai monarchy.

The unrest that has overtaken Thailand since early November has only highlighted the importance of these issues.

A. Thailand's new social and political order.

In 2014, and in all likelihood from now on, Thailand will be a polity of citizens and not subjects. For cultural, social, and economic reasons, a vast segment of the Thai population that long conceded domination of the country's politics to officers of the Thai state or to their putative social betters is no longer willing to do so.¹ The dawning social and political dominance of this newly politically aware majority has at least three major implications.

First, the North, Northeast and, to some degree, rural Central Thailand—and not just political strongmen representing provinces in those regions²—will play a larger role in national affairs than heretofore. Their role will in some ways resemble that long played by the upper South through its parliamentary representatives in the Democrat Party.³ This regional dimension of political change in Thailand also has a pronounced ethnic dimension: the “Lao” people of northern and northeastern Thailand will play political roles more closely commensurate with their numbers.⁴ It had long been assumed, wrongly it is now clear, that the early and middle years of King Phumiphon's long reign had made this ethnic dimension of Thai politics practically irrelevant.⁵

¹ These developments have been admirably treated by numerous analysts. A particularly useful example is Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, “Thailand in Trouble: Revolt of the Downtrodden or Conflict among Elites?”, pp. 214-229 in Michael J. Montesano, Pavin Chachavalpongpun and Aekapol Chongvilaivan, eds., *Bangkok, May 2010: Perspectives on a Divided Thailand* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2012).

² On the heyday of such figures, now passed, see from “Nakleng to Jaopho: Traditional and Modern Patrons”, Chapter IV (pp. 81-100) in James S. Ockey, *Making Democracy: Leadership, Class, Gender, and Political Participation in Thailand* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004).

³ See Mark Askew, *Performing Political Identity: The Democrat Party in Southern Thailand* (Chiang Mai: Silk-worm Books, 2008).

⁴ Together, northern and northeastern Thailand account for some 53 percent of Thailand's population; calculated from *Human Security, Today and Tomorrow: Thailand Human Development Report, 2009* (Bangkok: United Nations Development Program 2010), p. 142.

⁵ See David Streckfuss, “An ‘Ethnic’ Reading of ‘Thai’ History in the Twilight of the Century-Old Official ‘Thai’ National Model”, *South East Asia Research* XX, 3 (September 2012): 305-328.

Second, northern and northeastern Thailand will continue to be marked by growing and, frankly, unprecedented prosperity. Already, between 2007 and 2011, economic growth in northeast Thailand outstripped that in Bangkok by 40 percent to 17 percent.⁶ To be sure, some of that growth was due to so-called “Thaksinomics”, to policies branded “populist”. But some of it was also due to policies whose origins long predate Thaksin Chinnawat’s first premiership (2001-2005), to remittances from Bangkok and overseas, and to what may prove a self-sustaining intensification of economic activity in those regions. Inevitable investment in infrastructure and better links to China and Vietnam will only increase the prosperity of northern and northeastern Thailand.⁷ That prosperity is, to be sure, tied to China’s growth and to ASEAN’s integration. While the people of those regions will for some time remain, on average, poorer and less well educated than the people of Bangkok, their political orientation will be informed by aspiration rather than destitution, by feelings of stakeholderhood rather than grievance. Many of what Duncan McCargo has labelled the “urbanized villagers” of the North and Northeast, people who have long left full-time farming behind, already work in Bangkok, above all in blue-collar professions.⁸ To the degree that they vote in increasing numbers in Bangkok rather than in their native provinces, even Bangkok politics will increasingly reflect their priorities and their influence.

Third, from shortly after the end of the Second World War through the 1970s, Thailand imposed heavy taxes on agriculture to the advantage of the urban sector.⁹ From the mid-1970s onward, successive Thai governments have reversed that flow of resources, in a policy shift typical of economies in which agriculture and the rural sector represent a declining share of total economic activity.¹⁰ Most famous, or infamous, among such policies as adopted by Prime Minister Yinglakh Chinnawat’s government is its calamitously designed “rice pledge” scheme, which has cost in excess of USD 20 billion and led to Thailand’s losing its position as the world’s leading rice exporter.¹¹ This policy has proved poorly designed and almost certainly unsustainable. Nevertheless, such inter-sectoral transfer payments will remain a central fixture

⁶ Paul Carsten and Pairat Temphairojana, “Thailand’s Boom: To the Northeast the Spoils”, *Reuters*, 15 June 2013 (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/06/16/us-thailand-northeast-idUSBRE95F00H20130616>, accessed 4 February 2014).

⁷ For an exhaustive treatment of planned linkages, see Geoff Wade “ASEAN Divides”, *New Mandala*, 23 December 2010 (<http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/Wade-ASEAN-Divides.pdf>, accessed 4 February 2014).

⁸ Duncan McCargo, “The Last Gasp of Thai Paternalism”, *The International New York Times*, 19 December 2013 (<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/20/opinion/the-last-gasp-of-thai-paternalism.html>, accessed 5 February 2014). Also see Naruemon Thabchumpon and Duncan McCargo, “Urbanized Villagers in the 2010 Thai Redshirt Protests: Not Just Poor Farmers?”, *Asian Survey* LI, 6 (November 2011): 993–1018.

⁹ James C. Ingram, *Economic Change in Thailand, 1850-1970* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1971), pp. 87-92, 243-261.

¹⁰ Andrew Walker, *Thailand’s Political Peasants: Power in the Modern Rural Economy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012), pp. 49-56.

¹¹ Warangkana Chomchuen, “Thailand Has No Easy Options to Pay for Rice Subsidy”, *The Wall Street Journal: Southeast Asia Realtime* (<http://blogs.wsj.com/searealtime/2013/10/07/thailand-has-no-easy-options-to-pay-for-rice-subsidy>, accessed 4 February 2014).

of Thai economic policy. They have helped create not only what Andrew Walker terms “middle-income peasants” but also a conviction among members of that group that politics is something in which they have a stake.¹² Participants in Thai politics will from now on thus compete in part by means of the design and advantages of variants of transfer-payment policies. Labelling these policies a form of vote buying, as supporters of the continuing protests against the Yinglax government have done,¹³ will be—and should be—a fast-track to political irrelevance.¹⁴ Rather than indulging their bigotry by decrying such policies, which have after all a history dating to the mid-1970s, politically engaged members of the most capable segments of Thai society will best make their mark by working to improve these policies and thus be more accepted across the political spectrum.¹⁵

Since 2001, former Prime Minister Thaksin and political forces allied to him have benefitted from each of these three trends. They have also, to be sure, had some hand in reinforcing or accelerating them. But neither Mr Thaksin nor his approach to politics is responsible for them. And if Mr Thaksin and the Chinnawat family were—as the protestors thronging the streets of Bangkok since early November 2013 have demanded—to vanish from the scene tomorrow, these trends would persist. And they are likely to define Thai politics and society not only in the next year but also in the next decade or decade and a half.¹⁶

Despite worries to the contrary, neither a feared *coup d'état*, the intervention of the courts nor the apparent aversion of Thailand's Election Commission to actually holding an election denied Thai voters the franchise on 2 February. The foregone conclusion of those polls was a victory for prime minister's Phuea Thai Party. For

¹² Walker, *Thailand's Political Peasants*, pp. 6 ff.

¹³ Amy Sawitta Lefevre and Pracha Hariraksapitak, “Thai PM under fire as rice scheme sinks, poll challenged”, *Reuters*, 4 February 2014 (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/04/us-thailand-protest-idUS-BREA1005720140204>, accessed 5 February 2014).

¹⁴ See Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, “Vote-Buying Claims Nothing but Dangerous Nonsense”, *The Bangkok Post*, 6 December 2013 (<http://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/383418/vote-buying-claims-nothing-but-dangerous-nonsense>, accessed 8 December 2013)

¹⁵ Because agendas and policies now basically deemed “Red” will define that spectrum, there is no reason to believe that “Red” voters will support a single electoral vehicle, like today's Phuea Thai Party. In fact, a range of “Red” parties may compete with one another, some perhaps even mobilizing support among southern Thai voters historically loyal to the Democrat Party or among more affluent Bangkokian voters. The question that this scenario raises is whether competition among multiple parties with comparable platforms will not result in the sort of weak multi-party coalitions that, from the early 1980s to the late 1990s proved so susceptible to behind-the-scenes manipulation on the party of the “network monarchy”. (See Duncan McCargo, “Network Monarchy and Legitimacy Crises in Thailand”, *The Pacific Review* XVIII, 4 (December 2005): 499–519, esp. pp. 501 and 507.) While this concern merits mention, the increased political awareness and engagement of the previously rather passive and disengaged majority of the Thai electorate may well obviate the risk of such an outcome. On this latter point, also see the following note.

¹⁶ Nishizaki Yoshinori, “Peasants and the Redshirt Movement in Thailand: Some Dissenting Voices”, *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, published online 30 January 2014 (<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/03066150.2013.873409>, accessed 5 February 2014) seeks to offer a trenchantly contrarian view of the current state of rural politics in Thailand. But, even while focusing in his effort to question the notion of nearly monolithic support for Mr Thaksin and the Red Shirts in the rural North on a segment of society rather poorer than those that McCargo and Walker place at the center of their analyses, Nishizaki nevertheless highlights the high levels of political engagement, interest and awareness of his respondent-subjects. In a similar vein, on rural Nongkhai in the Thai Northeast, see Pattana Kitiarsa, “From Red to Red: An Auto-Ethnography of Economic and Political Transitions in a Northeastern Thai Village”, pp. 230-248 in Montesano, Pavin and Aekapol, *Bangkok, May 2010*.

Thailand's Democrat Party, which—having failed in multiple elections either to defy or accommodate itself to the country's new social and political realities—declined to participate in them. Its supporters prevented the registration of parliamentary candidates in 28 constituencies in eight southern provinces.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the self-proclaimed People's Committee to Change Thailand into an Absolute Democracy with the King as Head of State, or PCAD,¹⁸ fronted by veteran Democrat Party stalwart Suthep Thueaksuban, failed either to provoke a military seizure of state power or otherwise to block the polls. Its supporters did manage to block the distribution of ballot papers to or voting in a number of Bangkok constituencies.¹⁹ No voting took place at all in the provinces of Krabi, Chumphon, Trang, Phang Nga, Phatthalung, Phuket, Ranong, Songkhla or Surat Thani—all located in the Democrats' electoral bailiwick of the Upper South.²⁰ Elections to fill those parliamentary seats for which balloting was impossible must now take place.²¹ Whether these polls will prove possible, or whether efforts to prevent them will again succeed, remains to be seen.

In the meantime, the newly elected Thai parliament is without a quorum and thus unable to meet.²² The Phuea Thai Party government of Prime Minister Yinglax remains in office on a caretaker basis, facing a constitutional deadline requiring parliament to elect a new premier within 60 days of an election.²³ The Democrat Party has asked the Constitutional Court to annul the 2 February polls and to dissolve Phuea Thai.²⁴ Ms Yinglax faces a National Anti-Corruption Commission investigation over her government's rice pledge program,²⁵ as do more than three hundred members

¹⁷ Paritta Wangkiat and Pradit Ruangdit, "EC to Decide if Feb Poll Goes Ahead," *The Bangkok Post*, 2 January 2014 (<http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/local/387556/ec-to-decide-if-feb-poll-goes-ahead>, accessed 6 February 2014).

¹⁸ That is, "คณะกรรมการประชาชนเพื่อการเปลี่ยนแปลงประเทศไทยให้เป็นประชาธิปไตยที่สมบูรณ์ อันมีพระมหากษัตริย์ทรงเป็นประมุข"—a name with spookily reactionary echoes of the Thai term for the regime of "absolute monarchy" (ระบอบสมบูรณาญาสิทธิราชย์) abolished in 1932. In English, this group prefers to be known by the less accurate translation of its name, "the People's Democratic Reform Committee" or "PDRC"; "Khaosod English's Note On Translation Of Anti-Govt Leadership" [sic], Khaosod English, 24 December 2014 (http://www.khaosod.co.th/en/view_newsonline.php?newsid=TVRNNE56ZzNNaUzTIE9PQ, accessed 4 February 2014).

¹⁹ James Hookway, "Thai Elections Fail to Resolve Political Stalemate", *The Wall Street Journal*, 2 February 2014 (<http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702303973704579357564176384716>, accessed 5 February 2014).

²⁰ "Most Provinces See Voter Turnout Fall from 2011 Election", *The Nation* (Bangkok), 4 February 2014 (<http://www.nationmultimedia.com/politics/Most-provinces-see-voter-turnout-fall-from-2011-el-30225977.html>, accessed 6 February 2014).

²¹ Opas Boonlom, "Validity of Sunday Polls Still in Question", *The Nation*, 5 February 2014 (<http://www.nationmultimedia.com/politics/Validity-of-Sunday-polls-still-in-question-30226089.html>, accessed 6 February 2014).

²² Banyan (pseud.). "Thailand's Election: A Symbolic Exercise", *The Economist*, 2 February 2014 (<http://www.economist.com/blogs/banyan/2014/02/thailand-s-election>, accessed 6 February 2014).

²³ Thanong Khanthong, "Sound of Ticking Time Bombs is Getting Louder for Yingluck", *The Nation*, 7 February 2014 (<http://www.nationmultimedia.com/opinion/Sound-of-ticking-time-bombs-is-getting-louder-for-30226230.html>, accessed 6 February 2014).

²⁴ "Thailand Opposition Mounts Legal Bid to Annul Election", *The Guardian*, 4 February 2014 (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/04/thailand-opposition-annul-election-yingluck-shinawatra>, accessed 6 February 2014).

²⁵ Anuphan Chantana, "NACC to Consider Impeachment against Yingluck over Rice-Pledging Scheme", *The Nation*, 28 January 2014 (<http://www.nationmultimedia.com/politics/NACC-to-consider-impeachment-against-Yingluck-over-30225368.html>, accessed 6 February 2014).

of her party's members of parliament, for their roles in supporting a constitutional amendment late last year that would have given Thailand a wholly elected senate.²⁶

These developments set the stage for a possible judicial coup to oust the Yinglax government, a turn of events that would in effect bring realization of the PCAD's goals. That possibility, like the possibility that either a loss of patience with continued political chaos on the part of Thailand's military leadership or pressure brought to be bear on that leadership by leading figures in the "network monarchy"²⁷ will precipitate an armed coup, brings great risk. Fatal encounters between supporters of the PCAD and supporters of the Yinglax government on the night of 30 November²⁸ and between supporters of the PCAD and the police on 26 December²⁹ and above all a shoot-out at Lak Si in the northern part of Bangkok on the eve of the election³⁰ underline the potential for extreme and widespread violence in a divided Thailand. Judicial or military intervention to oust Yinglax would risk provoking a violent reaction on the part of Thai Red Shirts. Should this reaction take the form not of isolated episodes but of a pattern of continuing resistance and of consequent repression on the part of ambivalent and perhaps divided security forces, and should it come not just in Bangkok but in dispersed locations across provincial Thailand, the country would approach a condition meeting some observers' criteria for civil war.

Mr Suthep, the PCAD and the protestors that they have drawn to the streets of Bangkok since early November argued that "reform" of the Thai political system ought to precede polls.³¹ As Democrat Party leader and former Prime Minister Aphisit Wetchachiwa made clear in a post-election interview with the BBC,³² the goal of political reform has survived the movement's failure to achieve that goal before polls were held. Echoing language introduced into Thai political discourse by King Phumiphon at the height of Cold War counter-insurgency,³³ the PCAD and the Democrats would

²⁶ Nattaya Chetchotiros and King-oua Laohong, "NACC to Charge 308 Lawmakers: Chances of Forming New Govt Take Another Blow", *The Bangkok Post*, 8 January 2014 (<http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/local/388445/nacc-to-charge-308-lawmakers>, accessed 6 February 2014).

²⁷ See McCargo, "Network Monarchy and Legitimacy Crises", *op cit*.

²⁸ "One Killed as 'V-Day' Eve Violence Erupts", *The Bangkok Post*, 1 December 2013 (<http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/local/382474/one-killed-as-v-day-eve-violence-erupts>, accessed 5 January 2014).

²⁹ "Thailand: Election Commission Urges Poll Delay after Violent Clashes", *The Guardian*, 26 December 2013 (<http://www.theguardian.com/global/2013/dec/26/thailand-police-battle-protesters-disrupt-elections>, accessed 6 February 2014).

³⁰ "Police Accuse PDRM Armed Members over Laksi", *The Bangkok Post*, 2 February 2014 (<http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/politics/392827/police-accuse-protesters-of-starting-gunfire-at-lak-si>, accessed 6 February 2014).

³¹ "PDRM: Reform before Elections", *The Bangkok Post*, 13 December 2013 (<http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/local/384662/suthep-says-nationwide-reforms-must-be-agreed-before-the-election>, accessed 6 February 2014).

³² "Election Officials: Thailand Voting to Take Time", *BBC*, 3 February 2013 (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-26012474>, accessed 6 February 2014).

³³ In one of the most important and widely quoted speeches of his reign, delivered on 11 December 1969 to open Thailand's Sixth National Boy Scout Jamboree in Si Racha, King Phumiphon said, "In the country there are both good people and bad people. There is no one who can make all people good people. Making the country have normalcy, happiness and good order is therefore not a matter of making all people into good people." [ในบ้านเมืองนั้น มีทั้งคนดีและคนไม่ดี ไม่มีใครจะทำให้ทุกคนเป็นคนดีได้ทั้งหมด การทำให้บ้านเมืองมีความปรกติ สุขเรียบร้อย จึงมิใช่การ

turn to a body of “good people”³⁴ to rule the country and to oversee the reform process. Their agenda has nine noteworthy aspects.

First, that agenda is strikingly vague. It energizes its backers *via* a visceral hatred of Mr Thaksin that has long distracted those backers’ attention from the developments in Thai society and politics from which Mr Thaksin has benefitted but for which he is really not responsible. It recycles tired charges of “vote buying” that bespeak contempt for the judgement of the majority of the country’s electorate.³⁵

Second, it would embody the third major attempt in less than two decades on the part of Bangkok interests and Thai royalists to clip the wings of Thai voters. The first was the reformist constitution of 1997,³⁶ and the second the current constitution, created in 2007 under the auspices of the military junta that seized state power in the armed putsch of September 2006. Each of these earlier attempts failed, in the face of the trends in Thai politics and society discussed above.

Third, each of those earlier attempts introduced putatively independent bodies to check and balance electoral democracy. Yet the continuing naked politicization of those bodies by the opponents of Thaksinism has given the very idea of such bodies a bad name in Thailand. It will prove a crippling legacy, one with which the country will have to live for many years.³⁷

Fourth, while reliant for muscle on rural people from the Democrat Party’s southern Thai base,³⁸ the PCAD relies for most important support on a sliver of Thai society. Very perceptively, Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit label it the “middle class”

ทำให้ทุกคนเป็นคนดี), พระบรมราชโองการและพระราชดำรัส [Royal speeches and addresses] (<http://www.kingofthailand.cgi.ac.th/picture/05.jpg>, accessed 5 February 2014).

³⁴ Nithi laosiwong, “มวลมหาประชาชน โดย นธิ เอียวศรีวงศ์” [The great mass of the people by Nithi laosiwong], *Matichon Online*, 17 December 2013 (http://www.matichon.co.th/news_detail.php?newsid=1387190430, accessed 4 February 2014).

³⁵ Pasuk and Baker, “Vote-Buying Claims Nothing but Dangerous Nonsense”.

³⁶ For a reading of Thailand’s 1997 constitution as an early iteration of what Mr Suthep’s PCAD is now trying to achieve, see Duncan McCargo, “Alternative Meanings of Political Reform in Contemporary Thailand”, *The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies* XII (1998): 5-30.

³⁷ Of course, vitiation of the independent institutions enshrined in the 1997 constitution as checks on the will of the demos began during the 2001-2005 government of Mr Thaksin; see Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thaksin (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, second expanded edition, 2009)*, pp. 173 ff. Since 2006, the former prime minister’s enemies have proved at least his equals in playing the same game, above all using the tag-team of the National Anti-Corruption Commission and the Constitutional Court: to cite just several noteworthy examples, the results of the April 2006 elections were annulled on risible grounds, two Thaksinite prime ministers fell victim to judicial coups in the second half of 2008, and in both 2012 and 2013 the Constitutional Court blocked the Yinglax government’s attempts to amend the 2007 charter, even though it had followed the procedures for amendment set out in that same charter. On these two most recent episodes and related attempts on the part of the Democrat Party to use the Constitutional Court for nakedly political ends, see Michael J. Montesano, “The Struggle to Amend Thailand’s Constitution”, ISEAS Perspective No. 41, 1 July 2013 (http://www.iseas.edu.sg/documents/publication/iseas_perspective_2013_41_the_struggle_to_amend_thailands_constitution.pdf, accessed 6 February 2014), and Warangkana Chomchuen, “Thai Court Rules Against Constitution Amendment”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 20 November 2013 (<http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702303653004579209584204486364>, accessed 6 February 2014), respectively. Current pressures on Yinglax make clear that the game is still on, and that it will only further discredit the very idea of “independent institutions” in the minds of much of the Thai population.

³⁸ See, for example, Jinda Wedal and Todd Pitman, “Thai Premier Holds Firm as Protesters Block Roads in Capital”, *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto), 14 January 2014 (<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/thai-premier-holds-firm-as-protesters-block-roads-in-capital/article16334602/>, accessed 7 February 2014).

of a Bangkok “transformed by globalisation . . . mostly of Chinese origin, [which has] prospered, embraced modernity, and identified itself with booming urban Asia” rather than with the rest of its own country.³⁹ Rather more provocatively and perhaps not altogether fairly, Benedict Anderson more bluntly labels it “timid, selfish, uncultured, consumerist, and without any decent vision of the future of the country”.⁴⁰ The PCAD’s leadership envision this sliver of support as the “*muanmahaprachachon*”⁴¹ or “great mass of the people”—language that echoes the fascist politics of inter-war Central Europe and even Ali Moertopo’s “floating mass” (*massa mengambang*) during the Soeharto dictatorship in Indonesia⁴² and, as the eminent Thai historian Nithi laosiwong has recently written, language—along with political maneuvering to match—that recalls the social atomization and totalitarianism that scarred so much of the globe during the twentieth century.⁴³

Fifth, Suthep Thueaksuban is merely a front-man for the powerful interests that stand behind the PCAD. He acts with the backing of other influential forces, apparently segments of the Bangkok business community, of the military establishment and of the network monarchy.

Sixth, the political order, founded on the so-called *muanmahaprachachon*, that the PCAD seeks to introduce would require continuing and intensifying repression. Even then, it would prove unsustainable.

Seventh, the PCAD needs to be careful what it wishes for. As the discussion to follow makes clear, its own is hardly the only agenda for “reform” in today’s Thailand.

Eighth, one of the few specific elements of Mr Suthep’s call for political reform is the introduction of elected governors for Thailand’s provinces, rather than governors dispatched from Bangkok by the Ministry of the Interior.⁴⁴ This PCAD proposal appears to have originated in Mr Suthep’s make-it-up-as-you-go-along approach to his movement’s goals.⁴⁵ As such, it is one plank in his platform for “reform” that puts him on the right side of history. Whether, however, his supporters foresee the con-

³⁹ Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, “Thailand in Another Round of Turmoil”, *Economic and Political Weekly* (Mumbai), 28 December 2013.

⁴⁰ Benedict R. O’G. Anderson, “Outsider View of Thai Politics” [sic], *Prachatai English*, 5 August 2011 (<http://www.prachatai.com/english/node/2694>, accessed 4 February 2014).

⁴¹ That is, “มวลมหาประชาชน”. For a rather narcissistic or self-regarding celebration of this descriptor, see “People of the Year: Muan Maha Prachachon, 2013 Thai Uprising”, *The Bangkok Post*, 30 December 2013 (<http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/local/387211/people-of-the-year-muan-maha-prachachon-2013-thai-uprising>, accessed 4 February 2014).

⁴² See Robert E. Elson, *The Idea of Indonesia: A History* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 245 ff.

⁴³ See Nithi laosiwong, “The Great Mass of the People”, translated by Tyrell Haberkorn, *Prachatai English*, 31 December 2013 (<http://prachatai.com/english/node/3802>, accessed 4 February 2014). This is the English-language version of Nithi, “มวลมหาประชาชน โดย นธิ เอียวศรีวงศ์”, *op cit*.

⁴⁴ Chutima Sidasathian, “Phuket Would Have Elected Governor, Keep 70 Percent of Tax Under Suthep Plan”, *Phuket Wan*, 12 December 2013 (<http://phuketwan.com/tourism/phuket-elected-governor-percent-tax-under-suthep-plan-19385/>, accessed 4 February 2014).

⁴⁵ Personal communication, PCAD advisor, 10 January 2014. Nithi calls attention to the sinister, totalitarian logic of this *ad hoc* approach in “The Great Mass of the People”, *op cit*.

sequences of the process of political devolution in Thailand that seems increasingly inevitable remains another question entirely.⁴⁶

Ninth, there is a particular reason for the urgency of Mr Suthep's PCAD, and it relates to the second in the pair of issues brought into focus by the current phase of the long Thai crisis: the future of Thailand's monarchy.

B. Succession to the next reign and the future of the Thai monarchy.

In an open letter released on 18 December, one of Thailand's most senior intellectual figures challenged parties from across the Thai political spectrum to offer in the run-up to 2 February 2014 clear platforms for reform to the voters. First among the matters that he urged that those platforms should address was reform of Article 112 of the Thai criminal code, governing the crime of *lèse majesté*.⁴⁷

The future of the monarchy and its role in Thai life are central to Thailand's current crisis, and they will be central to developments in 2014 and beyond. American diplomatic cables released by Wikileaks have made clear to the world how concerned senior figures in Thailand's network monarchy are about the coming succession.⁴⁸ One needs, however, to understand these concerns in two particular contexts.

One of these contexts is historical. When King Phumiphon returned from Switzerland in late 1951 to live in Thailand for good, senior courtiers and others carefully managed his transition into the role of full-time king.⁴⁹ The revival of monarchy as a central institution in Thailand and the leading role in Thai politics that King Phumiphon played for many years reflect the success of this sort of management. In the activities of the managers of the early years of King Phumiphon's reign lie the ultimate origins of the modern network monarchy as it operated during its years of greatest influence after 1980.⁵⁰ Members of today's network monarchy understand that management of the monarchy during the transition to a new reign will be crucial even to the monarchy's survival. Many in the network fear nothing so much as Thaksin Chinnawat's playing a leading role in that transition. They thus also fear the consequences of a Thaksinite government's being in power as that transition unfolds.

⁴⁶ It must be noted here that this process may also pave the way to eventual resolution of the crisis in Thailand's far South; see Michael J. Montesano, "Four Thai Pathologies, Late 2009", pp. 273-302 in Marc Askew, ed., *Legitimacy Crisis in Thailand* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2010), pp. 284-286.

⁴⁷ "จดหมายเปิดผนึกจาก อาจารย์ชาญวิทย์ เกษตรศิริ เรื่อง พรรคประชาธิปัตย์ กับ การเลือกตั้ง 2 กุมภาพันธ์ 2557 18 ธันวาคม 2556" [Open letter from Professor Chanwit Kasetsiri concerning the Democrat Party and the Elections of 2 February 2013]. The remainder of the letter suggests a reform agenda covering such areas as gender, social and economic equality; the judicial system; the courts; media; and land rights—an agenda whose breadth could only make Mr Suthep and many of his followers uncomfortable.

⁴⁸ See, for example, United States Embassy, Bangkok, "Thailand: Ambassador engages Privy Council Chair Prem, Other 'Establishment' Figures in Year Ahead", 25 January 2010 (<http://dazzlepod.com/cable/10BANGKOK192/>, accessed 5 February 2014).

⁴⁹ Paul Handley, *The King Never Smiles: A Biography of Thailand's Bhumibol Adulyadej* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 119 ff.; see also the discussion on pp. 83 ff.

⁵⁰ McCargo, "Network Monarchy and Legitimacy Crises", pp. 501 and 506 ff.

The determination of the forces behind Mr Suthep and his PCAD to oust the Yinglax government and to deny Ms Yinglax the legitimacy that the electoral mandate brings relates very directly to these fears. They help explain Mr Suthep's frantic, but ultimately futile, efforts to keep Thai voters from going to the polls on 2 February. They also help explain the mission of his proposed unelected "people's council" of "good people".⁵¹ Basic among its tasks would be to safeguard management of the eventual transition to a new reign.

The second context for concern among senior figures in Thailand's network monarchy over the implications of the ongoing political crisis for the succession relates more directly to the future than to the past. The effort in the late 1940s and early 1950s to restore the prestige and influence of the Thai monarchy after the setbacks that it suffered in the wake of the end of royal absolutism in 1932 represented as much as anything else a feat of imagination. The institution required refashioning for a very different era, and, as ultimately effected, this refashioning, with a big boost from Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat,⁵² proved successful for many decades. Similarly, the future of the Thai monarchy after the end of King Phumiphon's reign will depend on the successful re-imagining of its relevance and the consequent refashioning of its role for a new era. The insecurity that marks much fretting over the succession represents, then, not least a failure of imagination among figures influential in the later years of the current reign. It also almost surely represents their attachment to power, privileges and personal status that they would lose in the course of any project to adapt the monarchy to the demands and realities of the times. But who is to say that the possibly very different cast of characters who will manage the next reign during its first years will suffer from a comparable lack of imagination concerning the place of monarchy in contemporary Thailand?

Red Shirts have their own view of these matters. Some Red Shirt leaders in northern Thailand are convinced that a violent incident planned for 9 December was meant to trigger a coup on the part of an important faction in the Thai Army, but that the heir to the throne moved to head that coup off by prevailing on Prime Minister Yinglax to dissolve parliament on 8 December. It is impossible to know the truth of such reports, but they echo the views of some in Thailand that the advent of the next reign is already under way.

These brief observations on the central place of concern over the future of the Thai monarchy in what lies ahead for Thailand have five major implications.

First, the machinations of members of the network monarchy, marked above all by their lack of political imagination, have turned the revived the Thai monarchism of

⁵¹ That is, "*khon di*" (คนดี); see "รายงาน: การตีความ ม.7 - รากความคิด 'สภาประชาชน' คนดีจัดการทุนสามานย์" [Report: Interpreting Article 7 – The roots of the idea of a "people's council": good people to deal with depraved capitalism], *Prachatai.com*, 8 December 2013 (<http://prachatai.com/journal/2013/12/50263>, accessed 6 February 2014). "Depraved capitalism" ("*thun saman*", "ทุนสามานย์") is a standard PCAD label for Mr Thaksin's economic policies and self-enrichment.

⁵² See Kobkua Suwannathat-Pian, *Kings, Country and Constitutions: Thailand's Political Development, 1932-2000* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), pp. 155 ff.

the past five decades from a putative source of political stability into a clear source of instability. It is important to be clear, in this context, that it is in the nature of network monarchy that these machinations need not necessarily have the endorsement of—let alone come in response to instructions from—the palace itself. A corollary of this reality, central to any understanding of the current crisis, is that the interests of Thai monarchism and of many of the figures now most influential in the network monarchy may well not be the same, especially from a long-term perspective.

Second, extreme hatred of Mr Thaksin has supplanted clear-headed analysis of a problem that would exist even if he vanished from the scene. In this sense, concern over the succession and the future of the monarchy runs parallel to and thus reinforces denial of changed political and social realities among supporters of the PCAD and those who stand behind it.

Third, that problem lies above all in charting a fresh, more modest role for monarchy in a Thailand that is much more complex and wealthier than the Thailand to which King Phumiphon returned from Lausanne in 1951. It is a Thailand with a better informed and more sophisticated citizenry, and—crucially—it is a Thailand whose talented people are less of prepared to devote themselves to long-term service to the throne. In this Thailand, those who would play a role in helping manage the monarchy's future must discover for it a relevance to national concerns analogous to that demonstrated by King Phumiphon during the Cold War. They must also—again, with an admixture of some local imagination—learn from the globe's truly constitutional monarchies, not least perhaps those of Scandinavia and the Low Countries.⁵³

Fourth, the same cultural, social and economic trends that have so thoroughly reshaped the Thai political order also challenge the Thai monarchy to re-invent itself. In many ways, the system of hierarchy that the PCAD is fighting so desperately to preserve is dependent on notions of status grounded in the presence of a respected figure at the very top of the social order. Those notions have less and less purchase with many Thais. Networks of frankly republican sentiment are gaining strength and coherence in the country; that sentiment has begun to move out of the shadows. Some observers of Thai politics believe that today's monarchy would struggle to survive reform of the law of *lèse majesté*. This need not remain the case.

Fifth, while it is common to refer in Thailand to “the royal institution”,⁵⁴ in living memory that institution has owed its strength to the perceived achievements of one man. As his passing from the scene nears, the destruction done to other institutions, above all Thailand's highest courts and its putatively independent bodies, by both parties to Thailand's great divide during the past decade will prove more and more costly to the country.⁵⁵ This cost will be one that the citizens of Thailand will have to bear, both in 2014 and long after.

⁵³ Excluding, that is, Luxembourg.

⁵⁴ That is “*sathaban phramahakasad*” (สถาบันพระมหากษัตริย์).

⁵⁵ See note 37, above.

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Institute of Southeast Asian Studies
30, Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Pasir Panjang, Singapore 119614
Main Tel: (65) 6778 0955
Main Fax: (65) 6778 1735

Homepage: www.iseas.edu.sg

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