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## Language

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The continuing conflict between the poor rural population, loyal to the former Prime Minister Thaksin, and the metropolitan classes (described under [10.b.](#) [1]) led to yet another military coup in May 2014. The coup ousted another Thaksin government, this time led by his sister Yingluck. The military claimed the reason for imposing martial law was the seven month long movement by anti-Thaksin forces, who occupied key sites in Bangkok and demanded a new constitution to prevent pro-Thaksin parties winning every election, as they had since 2001. This time the military consolidated their power, declaring Thailand's disorder was due to too much democracy, and created the National Council for Peace and Order, selecting General Prayuth Chan-Ocha as prime minister. The junta then postponed holding a new election until March 2019.

The military had civilian support in reverting to authoritarianism, for example among some political and professional elites. But the monarchy also has a key role in legitimizing the military - the links have been close since monarchical rule ended in 1932. The monarchy has, however, officially had a constitutional role within the parliamentary system. King Bhumibhol Adulyadej, who reigned for 70 years until his death in 2016, despite being allied with conservative and military forces was popular and generally respected. His son, King Maha Vajiralongkorn, by contrast, is notorious for his extravagant and scandalous life-style, and he has continued to live abroad in Germany even after acceding to the throne. Nevertheless, he has also chosen since 2016 to increase his royal power, taking control of crown property and direct command of some regiments, and intervening in politics. He has also packed the privy council with his military allies.

When an election was eventually held in May 2019, the introduction of a new constitution ensured continuing military control and provisions to prevent success by pro-Thaksin forces. An Upper House of 250 members was to be directly appointed by the military, and 150 seats out of 500 seats in the Lower House were to be contested on a proportional representation basis favouring election of smaller parties. The prime minister was to be selected at a joint session of the Upper and Lower Houses. The military also controlled which parties were allowed to register for the election. Doubts about the election resulting in any real change were well-founded. Although pro-Thaksin candidates did well in the elections, the pro-military political party established a narrow majority in the Lower House, and the new parliament selected General Chan-Ocha as prime minister.

### **Students Lead 2020 Rebellion against the Military and the King**

University and school students have played a key role in the determined and daring movement of protest that hit the headlines from the end of July to December 2020, but it originated from political events at the beginning of the year. In February the government banned the political party Future Forward, which had won 81 seats in 2019 election and which called for reforms to the army, more decentralized and democratic government and curbs on big business. There was a strong response by students, who took to the streets against the ban, and who later took up the party's policy demands. However, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic prevented public demonstrations until the summer. The movement then erupted in Bangkok, spread to cities throughout the country and brought tens of thousands onto the streets, and maintained momentum until December. Although students were at the forefront, they had support from much of the population.

The student movement was coordinated through social media, especially Tinder and Tik Tok, drew on international internet culture - for example their distinctive three finger symbol of defiance was taken from the Hunger Games. It also playfully mocked the authorities, representing them for example with inflatable dinosaurs. But the movement also expressed clear and increasingly radical political criticisms of the military and the king, and issued demands for a new democratic constitution, a strictly constitutional monarchy and freedom for all political parties, as well as reforms to make education less authoritarian and hierarchical. The major demonstration on September 19 was timed to mark the anniversary of the military coup against Thaksin in 2006. A demonstration in December 2020 confronted the army barracks of a regiment under the direct control of the new king. Students risked mocking and confronting royal power despite the lese majeste laws dating from 1932, which made insulting the king and members of the royal family punishable by prison sentences of 3 to 15 years.

The military junta was uncertain how to deal with the demonstrations - arresting key individuals but allowing mass



protests, and both imposing and then lifting emergency measures against demonstrations in October. However, towards the end of the year the government used more violence and more extreme measures against protesters, such as water cannons containing chemical irritants and pepper spray. Students responded by wearing hard hats, deploying inflatable ducks as a protection against water cannons, and looking to Hong Kong activists for inspiration, for example using umbrellas. A second wave of Covid-19 and consequent lockdown measures then effectively suspended public protest, and the regime used the opportunity to imprison leading activists and charge them with royal defamation and sedition.

When some protests did resume in March 2021, police used water cannons and batons, injuring some of the demonstrators. Some protesters interviewed expressed doubts about the clarity of political focus of the movement at that stage, and concern about opposition to the protesters and their demands within Thai society, especially among the older generation. Although youth opposition to the regime certainly remained, the momentum of the movement had been lost.

The references below cover the 2020 protests, but also provide background analysis of the 2014 military coup and of the nature of military and royal power currently being exercised.

Baker, Chris, [The 2014 Thai Coup and Some Roots of Authoritarianism](#) [2], Journal of Contemporary Asia, Vol. 46, issue 3, 2016, pp. 388-404

Baker argues that the purpose of the 2014 military coup was not only to end the influence of the radical Thaksin forces, but also to entrench authoritarianism. He stresses the role of 'the professional and official elite' in promoting the coup and examines authoritarian tendencies in Thai politics and in Bangkok's middle class.

Boyle, Peter, [Students Lead New Wave of Democracy Protest in Thailand](#) [3], Green Left Weekly, 2020

Reports on the wave of student protests across the country since the July 18 rally in front of the Democracy Monument. Focuses particularly on a protest on 19 August by thousands at Thammasat University in Bangkok (which has iconic significance in the history of Thai pro-democracy struggles), the largest of many student-led protests that day.

Chambers, Paul, [Book Review: Divided over Thaksin: Thailand's Coup and Problematic Transition](#) [4], Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs, 2010

This review provides a useful overview of the deep divisions in Thai politics between the supporters of the radical populist Thaksin and the strongly opposed conservative royalist groups, leading to the 2006 coup and conflict between the 'Red Shirts' and 'Yellow Shirts'.

See also: Funston, John, ed. , *Divided Over Thaksin: Thailand's Coup and Problematic Transition*, Singapore, Silkworm Books, 2009, pp. 203.

The book grew out of seminars on Thai politics at the Australian National University in 2006 and 2007; it has six chapters on the 2006 coup and constitutional issues arising, four on the sources of the growing radicalism in the rural and Muslim south of the country, and three on economic issues.

Eckersley, Jo, [King and Country](#) [5], New Internationalist, 2015, pp. 38-40

The article draws on interviews with Thai citizens to discuss why, a year after the May 2014 military coup, there were no protests in a country known for its activism on the streets. It outlines the extent of strict censorship and the draconian sentences, which could be imposed for insulting the king, and stresses the links between the 87 years old monarch and the military, dating back to a coup in 1957. Eckersley also looks back to the 2006 military coup against the Thaksin government and the violent suppression of Thaksin supporters in 2010, but suggests the death of the reigning monarch could precipitate change and expose the state as a 'naked military dictatorship'.



Elinoff, Eli, [Subjects of Politics: Between Democracy and Dictatorship in Thailand](#) [6], Anthropological Theory, Vol. 19, issue 1, 2019, pp. 143-149

An anthropological approach to explaining why the Thai military has tried to 'silence' politics, focusing on the emergence of the poor as political actors and the fears generated by this development. The article is based on research into squatter settlements on railway tracks in the provincial capital Khon Kaen demanding land rights (with support from NGO activists), between 2007 and 2017.

Gaber, Katrina, [Contesting the Thai Hyper-Royalist Nationalist Imaginary through Infrapolitical Everyday Resistance Online](#) [7], The International Journal of Conflict and Reconciliation, 0

This article focuses on the internet, not as a tool for mobilizing open protest, but enabling 'covert, individual, non-ohrganized' resistance in a repressive context.

Haberkorn, Tyrell, [In Bangkok: Remembering the Tak Bai Massacre](#) [8], OpenDemocracy, 03//11/2009,

Haberkorn recalls a massacre of peaceful protesters in the Muslim-majority south in October 2004 after a declaration of martial law. He argues the failure of the state and courts to hold any official accountable for 78 deaths demonstrates the country's 'deepening crisis' in which the International Crisis Group reported (22 June 2009) over, 3,400 people had died.

Haberkorn, Tyrell, [The Anniversary of a Massacre and the Death of a Monarch](#) [9], Journal of Asian Studies, Vol. 76, issue 2, 2017, pp. 269-281

Haberkorn begins by describing a photographic exhibition at Thammasat university of the massacre of students there in October 1976 in connection with a military coup. The exhibition in October 2016, which commemorated the fortieth anniversary of that tragedy, had particular resonance in the context of the 2014 military coup and the death of the king after 70 years on the throne in 2016.

Hewison, Kevin, [A Book, the King and the 2006 Coup](#) [10], Journal of Contemporary Asia, Vol. 38, issue 1, 2008, pp. 190-211

Hewison assesses a biography of King Bhumibol Adulyadej, which the palace tried to suppress, and which examines the king's role in Thai politics and in the moves to suppress Thaksin.

See also: Handley, Paul, *The King Never Smiles: A Biography of Thailand's Bhumibol Adulyadej*, New Haven Conn, Yale University Press, 2006.

Lertchoosakul, Kanokrat, [The White Ribbon Movement: High School Students in the 2020 Thai Youth Protests](#) [11], Critical Asian Studies, Vol. 53, issue 2, 2021, pp. 206-218

The article draws on interviews with 150 university and 150school students, focus groups and observation of 16 protests to ascertain why high school students joined the demonstrations. The author concludes that they were rebelling both against conservative, authoritarian and repressive educational systems, and against political institutions - especially the monarchy.

Ockey, James, [Thailand in 2020: Politics, Protests and a Pandemic](#) [12], Asian Survey, Vol. 61, issue 1, 2021, pp. 115-122

Ockey notes that the Covid pandemic interrupted student-led protests for constitutional reform. When they resumed students demanded not only constitutional amendments already being considered by parliament, but the



resignation of the prime minister, dissolution of parliament and reform of the monarchy. He notes fears of violence between students and royalists or security forces.

Phasuk, Sunai, [Thailand's 'Bad Students' are Rising Up for Democracy and Change](#) [13], Human Rights Watch, 17/09/2020,

Report on student-led pro-democracy protests in Bangkok and at least 20 other provinces, calling for new elections, a new Constitution and reduction in the dominant role of the Thai monarchy.

See also: '#WhatsHappeningInThailand: 10 things you need to know', *Amnesty International*, 6 November 2020.

<https://amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/11/whats-happening-thailand-10-t...> [14]

See also: Selway, Joel, 'Thailand's National Moment: Protests in a Continuing Battle Over Nationalism', Brookings, 2 November, 2020.

<https://www.brookings.edu/nlog/order-from-chaos/2020/11/02/thailands-nat...> [15]

Phoborisut, Penchan, [Thai Youth's Struggle for Democracy may Fizzle but Political Contention Continues](#) [16], East Asian Forum Quarterly, Vol. 13, issue 2, 2021, pp. 21-24

Almost a year after protests began, the author reports on the detention of political activists, but also the evolution of decentralized networked forms of communication to promote mobilization against the Thai establishment.

Searight, Amy, [Thailand's First Elections Since Its 2014 Coup](#) [17], Center for Strategic and International Studies, 22/03/2019,

An analysis by a bipartisan US policy research institute of the forthcoming March 24 2019 elections, including the junta's rules governing them and the parties participating.

See also: Hannah Ellis Petersen, 'Junta Finds New Ways to Win an Old Game', *Guardian Weekly*, 21 December 2018, p.21.

See also: 'Final Election Results Leave Thailand Divided', *The Diplomat*, May 2019, pp.5.

<https://thediplomat.com/2019/05/thai-final-election-results-leave-thaila...> [18]

Sinpeng, Aim, [Hashtag Activism: Social Media and the #FreeYouth Protests in Thailand](#) [19], Critical Asian Studies, Vol. 53, issue 2, 2021, pp. 192-205

The 2020 protests were the first major pro-democracy demonstrations in Thailand mediated on Twitter. This article examines how activists used hash tags in the early phase of the movement, and argues that they developed collective narratives and spread information, rather than using Twitter to organize protests. The focus within the #FreeYouth campaign was on criticism of the government and calls for democracy, creating a 'pro-democracy collective action framework'.

Sopranzetti, Claudio, [Thailand's Relapse: the Implications of the May 2014 Coup](#) [20], Journal of Asian Studies, Vol. 75, issue 2, 2016, pp. 299-316

The author notes that at first the May 2014 coup looked like a re-run of earlier coups which resulted in short term military rule and an interim government, but the strength of repression and reorganization of power soon indicated a more major shift towards permanent authoritarianism based on new class alliances. He explores how this new phase has its roots in the earlier development of Thai politics in the 20th century.



Swamy, Arun, [Book Review: Future Forward: The Rise and Fall of a Thai Political Party](#) [21], Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs, 2021

Future Forward was founded as a political party before the 2019 election and managed to come third in the polls, after the junta-controlled coalition and the pro-Thaksin party. It was led by former student radicals who had become successful (key leaders were an industrialist, law professor and TV journalist) and aimed to change the nature of Thai politics. A year later the government banned it. Swamy provides a useful summary of the book and its aims, and his own critique - he argues the authors do not explain the continuing strength of the Thaksin party.

See also: McCargo, Duncan and Chattharakul Anyarat, *Future Forward: The Rise and Fall of a Thai Political Party*, Copenhagen. Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2020, pp. 240 (pb).

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<https://thediplomat.com/2019/05/thai-final-election-results-leave-thailand-divided/> [19]  
<https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/2021/hashtag-activism-social-media-and-freeyouth-protests-thailand> [20]  
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