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## Thailand: The Return of Authoritarianism

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### Cover Page Footnote

I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Pamela Zeiser and Ms. Lauren Newton for spending the time to help me narrow my topic down to a research question that was feasible for this project. I am so appreciative that they shared both their enthusiasm and immense knowledge with me, and I hope that they are as pleased with the outcome as I am.

# *Thailand: The Return of Authoritarianism*

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## **Abstract**

In the post–World War II global order, democracy has made advancements around the world. However, it is not uncommon for governments to establish systems that try to emulate democracy while embodying a more authoritarian rule, which quickly becomes problematic because authoritarian governments are notorious for violating their citizens' rights. This can be seen specifically in Thailand, where multiple military coups d'état have caused changes in the government, forcing the nation to alternate between democratic and authoritarian policies. The most recent coup staged in 2014, shifted the government away from democracy entirely, transitioning into the strictest authoritarian rule Thailand has seen since 1976. With this understanding, I analyzed the effects of the shift to authoritarianism in 2014 on Thai citizens and their rights. This project addresses this question by researching the junta that emerged from the 2014 coup called the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO). The NCPO believed the only way to hold onto power was through intimidation, suppression, and violation of the people's rights. Through torture, free speech infringements, and even murder, the NCPO and their leader, Prayuth Chan-ocha, have proven they are unable to lead Thailand in a manner that protects their people and advocates for their wellbeing.

In the post–World War II global order, democracy has made advancements around the world. However, it is not uncommon for governments to establish systems that try to emulate democracy while embodying a more authoritarian rule, which is problematic because authoritarian governments are notorious for violating the human rights of their citizens. This can be seen specifically in Thailand, where multiple changes in governing styles have brought the country closer and closer to authoritarianism. While the 2006 military coup seemed to be guiding Thailand's government back toward democracy, the return to a stricter authoritarian rule in 2014 has led to numerous violations of Thai citizens' rights unseen under previous regimes.

In 1932, Thailand experienced its first military coup d'état, which abruptly ended the absolute monarchy. Since then, the country has experienced a total of thirteen takeovers. While each of these individual coups is important, only a "select group of Thai coups" aimed "to shift the trajectory of the country's politics" and had an impact on the Thai government today (Baker 388). This includes the 1932 coup; the 1957 coup, which brought back the monarchy; and the 1976 coup, which instituted a democratic era with the king as the head of state. Many systems of governance were implemented and stripped away through these incessant coups; however, the current structure is modeled closely after what some see as "twin coups": the 2006 coup and the 2014 coup (Baker 389). This term was coined as both

coups originate from the same section of the military and had the primary goal of ending the regime of Thaksin Shinawatra, who was prime minister until 2006, and the continuing legacy of that rule that continued after his exile. The 2006 coup was able to achieve its goal of removing and exiling Shinawatra; however, it failed to make substantial changes within the government he left behind. Previous backers of the 2006 coup called this a “waste” and staged an uprising in 2014 to implement their own system of governance, completely erasing any political remnants of Shinawatra (Baker 389).

In 2014, a failed election allowed a gateway for the military to act and stage their coup. Yingluck Shinawatra, Thaksin Shinawatra’s younger sister, was voted into office as prime minister in 2011. In order to quell protests that demanded her removal, Yingluck Shinawatra dissolved parliament and, following her brother’s example, called for “snap elections, hoping they would confirm her popular support” (Sopranzetti 299). She won the election; however, reminiscent of what happened during her brother’s regime, the constitutional court overturned the vote. This period in which Thai society was acephalous allowed Prayuth Chan-ocha, the commander-in-chief of the army, to declare martial law and stage the “twelfth successful military coup in Thailand since the formal end of absolute monarchy” on May 22, 2014 (Sopranzetti 299).

While previous Thai governments had implemented authoritarian structures, the 2014 coup led the country through a system of suppression and restriction that quickly became more aggressive than past reigns. The junta that emerged, called the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), “ushered in the most repressive regime in Thailand since the counterinsurgent regimes of the Cold War” (Haberkorn, *Under and Beyond* 315). The martial law order that Chan-ocha declared was in effect for over ten months and only ended when the junta replaced it with Section 44, which “gives the head of

the junta absolute power of repression” (Baker 402). Specifically, it allowed Chan-ocha to make any laws or adjustments where he saw a “benefit of reform” or a need for “prevention... of any act which undermines public peace and order or national security” (Baker 402). While this was not seen as an issue at the time, the new addition to the Thai Constitution granted Chan-ocha unlimited power and permitted that any violations of a citizens’ rights could be dismissed through explanations that it was a necessary evil. Section 44 allowed the NCPO to intimidate the population through “violent interrogation techniques and possibly torture” on a select group of individuals (Baker 390). While torture has always been strenuously denied by the junta, it is believed to be a method they utilized. Chan-ocha talked openly and freely about violence in television addresses, notably threatening to “execute” journalists and “getting rid of human garbage” (Baker 390).

Torture is not the only method that the junta implemented to suppress both their opposition and the people of Thailand. They utilized “repressive regulations and techniques of intimidation to silence opposition in a more aggressive way than any coup since 1976,” making it their priority to eliminate all criticism and opposition to the junta and the monarchy (Baker 390). Any individual who dared to speak out against them was “treated as potential enemies,” including doctors, lawyers, journalists, and many others (Haberkorn, *Dictatorship* 936). Before the 2014 takeover, the government began to allow for some debate on the standing laws, including a “movement to amend Article 112” (Haberkorn, *Under and Beyond* 321). Article 112, which was added to the Thai Criminal Code in 1908, makes it illegal to defame or insult the Thai monarchy through any form of communication, including social media or verbal transmission. It is more commonly referred to as “lèse majesté,” a French term that means to do wrong to the monarchy (Haberkorn, *Under and Beyond* 312). Despite the progress made before

the 2014 coup, the NCPO almost immediately began using Section 112 to oppress the populace after they took power. This was easy for the NCPO to accomplish, as the law itself is written rather ambiguously and is open to interpretation.

Another method the junta utilized to eliminate criticism was the censorship of media, which often goes together with the *lèse majesté* law. Immediately after the coup, the media was “heavily censored or shut down if they [the media networks] refused to comply with the junta’s order” (Sopranzetti 304). All forms of media are a primary way for individuals to express their opinions, and therefore, citizens are frequently caught violating Article 112 on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. For example, Jatupat Boonpattaraksa, also known as Pai, “was arrested and accused of violating Article 112” on December 4, 2016 (Haberkorn, *Dictatorship* 935). His crime was the act of sharing a biography of the new king on Facebook, which detailed his “string of wives, his four abandoned sons, and his conferral of a military rank on his pet dog” (Haberkorn, *Dictatorship* 935). While thousands of people shared and re-shared the Facebook post, Pai was the only person who was arrested and prosecuted. This indicates the NCPO’s primary form of repression: intimidation through the law “to silence its critics” (Haberkorn, *Dictatorship* 936). While the junta is unable to catch and jail every individual who speaks out against them or the monarchy, they try to apprehend a small number of perpetrators with the hope that citizens will become obedient out of fear of meeting the same fate.

Currently, Thailand’s internet is severely censored, with “more blocked websites than China” (Sopranzetti 304). The continuous elimination of criticism and censorship of almost every form of media in Thailand has decimated the notion of free speech. Citizens are presently living under an authoritarian rule that approaches the rights of the people like a game of Risk. The regime limits those

rights deemed an inconvenience and erases those that could foster democratic movements or discussion. For example, free speech is not the only right on which the NCPO tramples on — they also cross the line in their judicial system. In *Fa Dieuw Kan*, a notorious Thai journal, Thanapol Eawsakul has written numerous articles “about abuse of power and the exercise of violence against citizens” (Haberkorn, *Dictatorship* 938). He was imprisoned for seven days following his first capture, and, when he was released, his social media accounts were watched. He was apprehended again for posting a Facebook post that criticized the NCPO, and instead of officially arresting him, an officer “invited him for coffee, and then took him from the coffee shop into custody,” a direct violation of his rights (Haberkorn, *Dictatorship* 938). He was not detained again; however, to this day, the police visit his office at *Fa Dieuw Kan* regularly and actively monitor his social media accounts.

Although the NCPO has never admitted to it, the suspicious circumstances around numerous activist’s disappearances and murders have proved that they know no moral bounds. In 2018, the brutalized “bodies of Chatcharn Buppawan and Kraidej Luelert were found on the Thai side of the Mekong River that separates Thailand and Laos” (Haberkorn, *Under and Beyond* 315). At first glance, this may seem like another simple murder case, but Buppawan and Luelert were self-imposed exiles who feared “that their questioning of the monarchy might lead to their arrest under Article 112” (Haberkorn, *Under and Beyond* 315). After arriving in Laos, they continued to speak up about the NCPO on online platforms, believing that “exile kept them safe from arrest and prosecution”; however, it “ultimately did not protect their lives” as they became “two among a total of nine” activist exiles who disappeared or were murdered since the 2014 coup (Haberkorn, *Under and Beyond* 315).

When they grasped power, the NCPO banned

“political activities,” which includes political opinions that do not coincide with the majority (Sopranzetti 304). Historically, Thailand has seen the rise and fall of factions through its numerous shifts in government. In 2017, the NCPO implemented Thailand’s twentieth new Constitution, which “continued to weaken political parties while assisting factionalism” and was likely instated to further their influence and power (Chambers and Waitoolkiat 157). However, this additional portion of the Thai Constitution had a direct link to the 2019 election, which was held to “restore the country to parliamentary democracy following a military coup d’état in May 2014” (McCargo and Alexander 90). When the junta’s attempts to continuously push the election back failed, Prayuth Chan-ocha, unwilling to give up on the administration he had created and the power he had obtained, created a system of smaller parties that “would work together... following the election” (Chambers and Waitoolkiat 157). Due to this, the election became rigged, and Chan-ocha won by a landslide victory of “500 to 244 in favor of Prayuth,” even though his opposition, Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, “had performed better in the elections” (McCargo and Alexander 91). Therefore, Thailand’s attempt to bring back democracy turned into a “democratic dictatorship,” a term coined by a pro-junta Senate supporter, and caused no change to the authoritarian status of the country (McCargo and Alexander 91).

The junta excels at using fear to intimidate their citizens into silence; however, this does not mean that the Thai population is happy with their government or agrees with their policies or techniques. In 2020, Wanchalearm Satsaksit became the ninth activist to disappear, which spurred “youth activists [to launch] ... the most radical and dangerous movement for democracy since 1932” (Haberkorn, *Under and Beyond* 315). Between February and March, “more than eighty-six campus flash mob actions on forty-seven university campuses in twenty-seven provinces

took place,” introducing an era of resistance against the NCPO that was primarily executed by Thailand’s youth (Lertchoosakul 208). When COVID-19 became a threat, universities closed and these rallies were moved off-campus, where they evolved into more violent and radical protests. There were two youth-led protests during this time that were notable: the Free Youth Movement and the White Ribbon Movement. The Free Youth Movement, known as “เยาวชนปลดแอก” in Thai, “attracted more than 2,500 participants to a flash mob action” to put pressure upon the NCPO to “end... intimidation, ... [dissolve] the sitting parliament, and [make] a new constitution” (Lertchoosakul 208). Afterward, the government took the rally leaders into custody, and threatened to “use new control measures including detention, high-pressure water cannons, [and] tear gas” on future protest participants (Lertchoosakul 208). In addition to the college-level Free Youth Movement, high school students in “the Bad Student (in Very Good Schools) (นักเรียนเลวในโรงเรียนแสนดี) group” created the White Ribbon Movement (Lertchoosakul 210). This protest was more subtle: they asked students across the country to wear white ribbons and hold up the three-finger Hunger Games salute while singing the national anthem “in support of student-led anti-government protests” (Lertchoosakul 211). This soon became a nationwide campaign, with thousands of high school students joining in.

While Wanchalearm Satsaksit’s case was the trigger for students to begin protesting, resentment against the government had been growing inside the Thai population for years. Students became the main force behind these protests because ultimately, it is their future, and they were able to link the economic and political problems their generation was facing back to “the authoritarian military government” (Lertchoosakul 213). However, whether their demands to “revise the constitution, dissolve parliament, ... schedule new elections, and, above all,

reform the monarchy” have been met by the NCPO, the fact that the Thai youth are trying to “protect their political rights before it is too late” means that change has begun (Lertchoosakul 215).

Although Thailand has always operated under governments that emulate more authoritarian policies than democratic ones, the 2014 Thai coup believed the only way to hold onto power was through intimidation, suppression, and violation

of the people’s rights. Through torture, free speech infringements, and even murder, the NCPO and Prayuth Chan-ocha have proved that they are unable to lead Thailand in a manner that protects their people and advocates for their wellbeing. However, as a society that lives under the threat of the NCPO constantly, Thailand’s youth have begun to revolt, creating hope for change and a better future that the junta will not be able to squash.

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