

# Why democracy struggles: Thailand's elite coup culture<sup>1</sup>

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*Since the revolution of 1932 that ended absolute monarchy, Thailand has experienced sporadic military interventions, with 19 coups and coup attempts over those decades. This article explains these military interventions by emphasising the cultural aspects of Thai coup-making at the elite level. Concretely, the article shows that episodic military interventionism—supported by significant and persistent military influence in politics—is now part of a distinctive elite coup culture. In contrast to other so-called ‘coup-prone’ states, Thailand has largely accommodated military interventionism, especially by accepting the defence of the monarchy as a justification for toppling elected governments. Thailand’s reluctance to redemocratised, and the haphazardness of the resulting institutional configurations, suggests that Thailand’s elite—and, to some extent, the public as well—have deeply internalised the ultimate acceptability of coups. The test of this arrangement may come with the end of King Bhumibol Adulyadej’s reign and the potential realignment of military influence in Thai society.*

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Coups d’état are a puzzlingly persistent feature of Thai politics.<sup>2</sup> It is only natural that they have been subjected to concerted scholarly attention. For many analysts, Thailand’s 19 modern military coups and attempted coups distinguish its elite political culture from those of other so-called ‘coup-prone’ states.<sup>3</sup> These analysts also usually suggest that Thai coups are merely one part of a much broader repertoire of non-electoral, non-parliamentary and non-transparent politics. Generations of scholars have grappled with aspects of this convoluted history, most commonly in the immediate aftermath of the most recent military coup. It is less usual to reflect on the overall pattern of military interventionism in an effort to create generalisable insight about elite politics in Thailand. In order to redress this analytical imbalance, I argue that Thailand has failed to consolidate a democratic culture among its elites that would make coups inconceivable. Instead, episodic military interventionism—supported by

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persistent military influence in politics—is now part of a distinctive Thai coup culture that has been reproduced over many decades.

That coup culture could be considered Thailand's most important contribution to comparative debates on military intervention in politics. Indeed, many scholars have sought to contextualise its relevant 'Thai-style' (*baeb thai*) characteristics (for example, Nakharin, 1990; Supaluck, 1994). The typical account of coup politics in Thailand explicates historical conditions while keeping a steady focus on any upheavals of recent memory, and on the personalities involved. The challenge presented by this literature is to discern the elements of the Thai story that are distinctive enough to support robust analysis, especially when considered in comparative perspective. If we examine its processes of military consolidation and post-coup democratisation alongside countries like Burma, Fiji, Indonesia and Papua New Guinea, there are clear indications that Thailand is an extreme case. Indeed, Fiji is the only one of these countries that is regularly identified with a 'coup culture' (McCarthy 2011). But Thailand swings far more wildly from military meddling to democratic reignition than these other countries, and habitually forgets history as quickly as expedience requires.

Thailand is further distinguished by the robust interplay of military and civilian politics, by competing alliances of economic and bureaucratic elites, and by the appetite of the army leadership for repeated efforts to consolidate control. This interventionist pattern has been reinforced by the special status of King Bhumibol Adulyadej and the royal family, who have been 'protected' (*kan raksa*) by the army at almost any cost. Defending the 'institution' (*sataban*) of the monarchy, which is officially considered the pinnacle of Thailand's sacred and secular life, is the primary requirement of national security. This was the core justification for the 2006 coup launched against the democratically elected government of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. That coup has seen the mobilisation of re-energised royalism and the creation of mass movements (often described in shorthand as 'Yellow Shirts' and 'Red Shirts') that are part of a new terrain of social conflict. In this recent period, the slogan 'We love the king' (*rao rak nai luang*) has become the convenient umbrella for organising political sentiments around the monarchy, especially where military interventionism has the potential to raise troubling questions about elite motivations.

This article on the dynamics of Thailand's coup culture begins by introducing the long history of the country's coups. The focus is on coups since 1932, when an elite uprising overthrew the absolute monarchy. Some coups—especially those in 1991 and 2006—are given special attention. Subsequently, the second section analyses the relationship between recent efforts of redemocratisation and the spectre of military interventionism. Most importantly, the section demonstrates that many leading figures in Thai society, including members of the interlocking royal, corporate, bureaucratic and military elites, are reluctant to consistently embrace democratic processes. In its third part, the article offers four interrelated propositions for explaining the country's elite coup culture.

These highlight the defence of the monarchy, notions of tolerance in Thai society, relations between economic elites, and the unwavering support of key international allies, most particularly the USA. While the focus of this article is relatively contemporary, the four explanatory propositions can perhaps be considered with a much longer history of palace and military ties in mind. Before the twentieth century, Siam's elite politics was founded on the synergy of royal and martial affairs; it is no coincidence that one of the most commonly used words for the king—*Phramahakasat*—refers to that history. In the elite culture that has evolved, what could be more natural than an army defending its 'great royal warrior'?

### The long history of coups

Analysing the historical context of Thailand's elite coup culture is complicated by the absence of clear linear patterns that cause changes in national government. As Clark D. Neher points out, cases of political succession in Thailand do not appear to be responses to economic downturns or specific threats to the nation's security. Instead, Neher (1992, 585) argues, a change in Thai government is best viewed as 'an unpatterned, ad hoc event dependent on changing allegiances and power advantages held by various elite groups, such as politicians, bureaucrats, capitalist business leaders, and military officers'. Understandably, this lack of any coherent pattern has frustrated generations of scholars hoping to understand the nature of coup politics in Thailand. Instead, however, of seeking to determine consistency in the practice of military interventionism, I propose an advancement of Neher's suggestion that 'the random nature of the succession changes has made it impossible to predict when coups will take place and with what results' (*ibid.*). Writing in the immediate aftermath of the February 23, 1991 coup, he suggests that 'not only did Thai and Western scholars fail to predict the military coup . . . but they had asserted the conventional wisdom that coups were an anachronistic part of the nation's past, no longer pertinent to the "new" democratic kingdom' (*ibid.*). The cultural bases for questioning this supposed anachronism, especially at an elite level, motivate this article's consideration of coups over time. Thailand's persistent, if sporadic, military interventionism helps to show that even 'unpatterned, ad hoc event[s]' are fused to cultural practices and expectations that, while they do shift over time, offer a foundation for rigorous and historically grounded analysis (Charnvit 2004).

In Siam, the first modern effort to launch a coup occurred in 1912, only two years after the death of King Chulalongkorn. The attempted rebellion, like many that were to follow it, was catalysed by factionalism among feuding groups of security officials. In 1911, the new king, Vajiravudh, had established a paramilitary organisation militia called the Wild Tiger Corps. According to Vella (1978, 45): 'The members of the coup group of 1912 were extremely

jealous of the Wild Tigers. The Tigers, first of all, were obviously very close to the King's heart'. Terwiel (2005, 237) makes the point that: 'among the military in particular there was resentment of the king's manifest preoccupation with the quasi military Wild Tigers'. Vella (1978, 47, 54, 57, 54) describes the 1912 incident as an 'aborted' and 'abortive' coup by 'very young' officers, in which '[t]he motives of the leaders showed the spread of Western political ideas, including the idea of nationalism, among the Thai people'. Indeed, that nationalist strain was the primary inspiration of the rebels—all of them junior officers—who took great risks in an effort to usurp the palace's power.

While it proved unsuccessful, the 1912 rebellion was a prelude to the overthrow of the absolute monarchy in 1932. Batson (1984, 236) suggests that throughout '[t]he early months of 1932 [there were] recurrent rumours and speculation of impending political changes in Siam'. Crucially, and in another element that has remained consistent over time,

[t]he activities of the plotters had been limited to Bangkok, as they had correctly judged that in securing control of the capital and the acquiescence of the king there would be no opposition to the new regime's extending its authority over the whole kingdom (Batson 1984, 239).

According to Thawatt (1962, 21–22): 'at the time when the revolutionaries set out to prepare and develop a broad strategy for the revolution, they were composed of 114 men', who were further divided into two army factions—a navy faction and a civilian faction. Thawatt explains that the difference between 1912 and 1932 was that the coup leaders in 1932, all of whom were colonels, were 'not only colourful personalities but had the prestige of outstanding educational backgrounds and high military positions' (27). He calls this an 'elite type' (28) organisation. It is relevant that elite interests and competition have similarly catalysed every subsequent coup or coup attempt.

For today's analyst, the outcomes of the 1932 revolution can be briefly described in two keys ways. First, the coup of 1932 'was hailed throughout the world as the most peaceful and bloodless of revolutions' (Thawatt 1962, 42). Conyers-Keynes (1950, 246) argues that in contrast to the experiences of 'civil war in England and later in America—we may suggest that the Siamese got their way far more humanely by the arrangement of a perfectly bloodless *coup d'état*'. The relatively passive acceptance of the constitutional transformation and the demotion of royal authority set a pattern which has been followed in most, but not all, of the upheavals that followed.<sup>4</sup> On occasions when more significant bloodshed has occurred during a coup, or its aftermath, the details tend to be lost, over time, in the general blur of subsequent political activity. Second, '[w]ith the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932, those who had held high positions in the old regime were suddenly and

unexpectedly faced with a completely new situation, and the subsequent paths of the king and his circle were many and varied' (Batson 1984, 253). Such interruptions and subsequent deviations of otherwise smooth lives and careers by military interventions can continue to reverberate, even to this day (Chaloeylakana 1988).

The long list of military interventions that followed the events of 1932 has meant oscillations between military dominance and more democratic moments, although even those more democratic periods are not divorced from military influence. After World War II—a period when Thailand was occupied by Japanese forces and grappled with a range of unenviable security and political choices—it faced a newly uncertain future, and looked to the USA for economic backing and international legitimacy. In June 1946, the young King Bhumibol ascended the throne after the death of his brother, King Ananda Mahidol. Even after more than 65 years, King Ananda's death is still widely described as 'suspicious', with speculation that regicide, suicide or accident was to blame. After King Bhumibol took the throne, it was not long before Thailand was under the firm control of military dictatorship. In his study of the relations between Thailand and the USA, Fineman (1997, 12) suggests that: 'The return to power of Thailand's wartime strongman, Field Marshall Plaek Phibunsongkhram, in a coup overthrowing the elected government in November 1947 could not have more exasperated the United States'. Ultimately, however, US support swung behind him. Indeed, Pickerell and Moore (1957, 92) stated that: 'Since 1948 the Government has been in the hands of a group known loosely as the Coup Party—leaders of the November 8, 1947 coup d'état which in 1948 restored Pibul [Phibun] as Premier'. Later, 'American pressure continually pushed Phibun and the Coup Group into repressing leftists more harshly than they would have if left to themselves' (Fineman 1997, 260).

While international pressures have always been important, it is apparent that domestic factors, especially as they influence the elite, are more often the primary drivers of military intervention. Writing about a later period, Morell argues that:

The actual causes of the [November 17, 1971] coup lay in Thailand's factional politics, the legislative threat to bureaucratic privilege, and pressure from younger military officers to do away with the trappings of democracy to protect their own political power base (Morell 1972, 156).

For the coup of 1976, Girling (1977, 387) suggests that 'many "ordinary people," not to mention the traditionalist elite, approved of the coup'. He goes on to argue that: 'the popular propensity to short-term comparisons (before and after October 1976), the belief in firm authority, the easy identification of democracy with disorder and violence, and indeed an attitude of living from day to day, are still prevalent' (Girling 1977, 387) and help explain popular

acquiescence to the military overthrow of a democratic government. At the same time, however, analysts such as Elliott (1978, 5) identified ‘the reactionary nature of the 1976 coup...the vicious attacks on socialists, workers and students which preceded and accompanied the coup’. Clearly, such domestic concerns cannot be divorced from the international environment. Flood (1976), on this point, has highlighted the formidable anti-communist credentials of the 1976 coup-makers and their affinity with the USA.

More recent coups, by contrast, have been justified in the *defence* of democracy. On February 23, 1991, the military’s National Peace Keeping Council ousted the elected government of Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan. As Ananya (1992, 313) writes: ‘It was Thailand’s eighteenth coup since the end of absolute monarchy in 1932, and it was preceded by one of the rounds of coup rumours that periodically circulate in Bangkok’. Suchit notes that:

The coup, which ended a decade-long parliamentary democracy, came as a surprise to most politicians, political observers, and academicians...The growing strength of parliamentary democracy in the past decade had convinced a number of people that Thai politics had reached a level of sophistication that made a coup a thing of the past (Suchit 1992, 131).

One official account suggested that ‘the objective [was] strengthening democratic processes through a revised constitution’, and that ‘[t]he takeover of administration was peaceful and widely endorsed by the people and the media’ (Office of the Prime Minister 1991, 139). Girling (1996, 20), however, has argued that: ‘Paradoxically, the 1991 coup, which disbanded the elected government, demonstrated not the revival of the bureaucratic polity but its last spasms’. As it turned out, his analysis was somewhat premature, as the bureaucratic polity has remained a key component of the wider landscape of power. Craig Reynolds and Team (2012), for example, introduced the notion of the ‘un-state’ to better characterise the links between Thailand’s royal, bureaucratic, military, corporate and educational institutions over time. That model of political organisation—with its metaphors of ropes, pulls, threads and ties—provides an opportunity to conceive a system in which, over time, ‘competing’ powers are entwined.

Misjudging the nature of those enmeshments after the 1991 coup, many analysts once again incorrectly assumed that the army had ‘returned to the barracks’ and that another coup was much less likely, even impossible. During this period, democratic institutions—especially those that accompanied the implementation of the 1997 constitution—became increasingly robust. What many analysts did not foresee, however, was that the electoral juggernaut spearheaded by Thaksin Shinawatra would so quickly threaten the influence of parts of the palace and the military. As Pasuk and Baker (2004, 176) observe: ‘Thaksin halted the decline in the political role of the military, and built a personal network into the military hierarchy’. It appears likely that part of

Thaksin's problem was that his network openly competed with the more established 'network monarchy' (McCargo 2005). For that royalist network, one aim of the post-1997 democratic system was to guarantee sufficient space for non-elected authorities to continue holding sway, and to see off any perceived threats to their status. Some in this established elite may have been willing to accept Thaksin's aggressive manner if he could be convinced to continue supporting establishment, and especially royal, interests. However, in 2005, the difficulty of absorbing Thaksin's ambitions in the old system became clear, and a street-level protest movement emerged. That movement helped pave the way for the military to yet again seize control.

Thailand's most recent coup saw tanks and troops manoeuvre onto the streets of Bangkok on the evening of September 19, 2006. This was the culmination of more than a year of concerted 'royalist' pressure against the Thaksin government (Ockey 2007; Ukrist 2008). Thaksin, a telecommunications billionaire and populist campaigner, had, since his second electoral triumph in February 2005, alienated large numbers of Thais in the elite and among the politically conscious middle class. In the southern provinces and in Bangkok, prevailing apathy about Thaksin's rule turned quickly to outright rejection. 'Thaksin get out' (*Thaksin ook pai*) became the chant at mass, yellow-swathed rallies in Bangkok.<sup>5</sup> The People's Alliance for Democracy, and its rabble-rousing leader Sondhi Limthongkul, constantly bellowed for Thaksin's ouster. As the political temperature rose, speculation about a coup began to circulate. All the same, in a comparative analysis published shortly after the military intervened, Beeson (2008) described the coup as 'largely unexpected'. Part of the reason, as Case (2009, 100) explains, is that '[a]mong the national leaders who have towered over Thai politics—Phibun Songkhram, Sarit Thanarat, Prem Tinsulanond, and Thaksin Shinawatra—only Thaksin has seriously contested elections'.

In the context of Thaksin's repeated electoral successes, Hewison (2007) launched a thorough critique of the notion that the 2006 military intervention could be considered a 'good' coup. In the same vein, Thitinan (2008, 140) noted that: 'The bloodless takeover . . . in a single day would drop Thailand's Freedom House rating from Free all the way to Not Free'. Nonetheless, Thailand continued to be considered a key ally of Western democracies and, while there was some consternation from abroad, the overall response to the coup-makers was muted. The wide-ranging sanctions and opprobrium targeting a country like Burma were nowhere to be found. Thaksin's brash antics, lack of genuine reformist credentials and alienation from the urban middle class—the demographic that tends to most consistently influence foreign views of Thailand—meant his government's decapitation was not widely mourned. Even among his ardent supporters, there was a meek acceptance that counter-attack and protest would not bring any immediate benefits. For a time, they were prepared to tolerate the coup. In its wake, small protests, including one in which a taxi rammed a tank, could not galvanise wider popular resistance.

Instead, in a familiar post-coup pattern, the new military leadership moved quickly to assure the public that a new constitution, and new elections, would not be far away. Even if it harboured initial hopes of keeping control, the coup group soon realised that managing the affairs of a sophisticated twenty-first-century society requires skill and experience. Bureaucrats and others sympathetic to the toppling of Thaksin were conscripted to fill key government positions and to present a somewhat demilitarised face to the public. General Surayud Chulanont, one of the king's trusted privy councillors, was drafted to the prime ministership—he never showed clear signs that he enjoyed this late-career obligation. When forces allied to deposed Prime Minister Thaksin convincingly won the election of December 23, 2007, it was apparent that the Thai people had resoundingly rejected the coup, the new constitution and the anti-Thaksin purge. As Thitinan (2008, 151) concluded: 'The establishment coalition that engineered Thaksin's political decapitation needs to accept that not all of what he stood for was wrong'.

### **Reluctant and inconsistent redemocratisation**

After that 2007 election victory, however, royalist, military and middle-class circles sustained their reluctance to accept Thaksin or the outcome of the election. With no consensus about appropriate mechanisms for managing political conflict, the years that followed were among the most turbulent and violent in Thai history. In 2008, Pasuk and Baker (2008, 18) suggested that '[t]alk of another coup [had] become constant'. By the end of that year, two prime ministers closely associated with Thaksin had been felled, and Abhisit Vejjajiva had been installed in the premiership. As the leader of the Democrat Party—which had long struggled to deliver strong election results—Abhisit owed his rise to the top of government in no small part to an audacious Yellow Shirt siege at Bangkok's international airport in November 2008. During their occupation of the strategic transport hub, anti-government protestors had shown the fragility of pro-Thaksin rule when it could not rely on military support. Once it took power, Abhisit's government unsurprisingly fared better in terms of the backing of the army, but still faced major pro-Thaksin uprisings in April 2009 and then, more violently, in April and May 2010. In April and May 2010, the Abhisit government was confronted by especially large protests in central Bangkok. These culminated in 91 deaths and hundreds of injuries during pitched battles between government troops and the protestors. The government could have faltered, but with strong and public support from the military and monarchy, there was never any serious doubt that it would survive the storm of discontent.

The real challenge for Abhisit and for the supporters of the 2006 coup was that their claims to democratic ideals required another test at the ballot box. For this election battle, Thaksin introduced his youngest sister, Yingluck

Shinawatra, into the fray. A political novice, she had clearly inherited some of the family's nous and campaigning style. In July 2011, the Pheu Thai party, with Yingluck at the helm and Thaksin calling the shots from exile, routed the Abhisit government. After this overwhelming victory, it was spectacularly apparent that the armed forces high command had failed in the wake of the 2006 coup to legitimise themselves in the face of utterly consistent support for Thaksin. Some senior military leaders have now reluctantly acquiesced to the overall political agenda represented by Thaksin. Since the election of the Yingluck government, a modicum of détente has emerged among the duelling factions (Farrelly 2012). But whatever the substance of these understandings, there is ever present danger that another coup will obliterate recent and incomplete efforts to reignite democratic tendencies.

In order to explain the reluctance of senior figures to consistently embrace democratic institutions, it is worth considering the more general character of Thai democracy, in which elite prerogatives tend to dominate and there is habitual disregard for alternative views. In this context, Hewison (2010) points to a process of 'conservative democratisation', while Connors (2008) analyses the webs of political influence that have made the boundaries between democratic and non-democratic politics hard to discern. He proposes that contests to decide the 'rules' of political interaction have continued to disrupt efforts to strengthen democratic institutions. Walker (2008, 2012), by contrast, has highlighted the importance of a 'rural constitution', through which Thailand's 'political peasants' engage with the political system. Their priorities are based on patronage and access, with an emphasis on their livelihoods and eligibility for government support. Thaksin, in Walker's argument, has been most adept at fulfilling the needs of the rural voter. Nishizaki's (2011, 236) focus on the details of provincial political leadership in Suphanburi is also inclined to challenge simple descriptions of democratic and non-democratic politics. For him, rural support for politicians like Thaksin should not be framed in terms of a 'barbarously simplistic and condescending analysis' in which rural voters are considered 'venal' and urban elites, such as senior military leaders, claim to be more 'rational'.

Put simply, the behaviour of senior members of Thailand's armed forces, at repeated intervals over many years, suggests engrained anxiety about the quality and power of democratic institutions, and particularly the elected politicians who control them. Democratic instincts have jostled with the military's efforts to maintain bureaucratic and royalist influences, with sporadic military interventions reasserting the legitimacy of the coup in the face of electoral mandates. Before a failed coup attempt in September 1985, for instance, '[t]he government had been trying to move beyond the image of a nation where political differences are settled by military intervention rather than elections' (Quinn-Judge 1985). General Prem Tinsulanonda led the government which stared down that particular coup attempt in the name of defending a more reformist polity. After retiring from the premiership, however, Prem became the

chairman of King Bhumibol's privy council and, in 2006, was closely associated with the coup-making group. This personal history suggests that commitments to democratisation are fickle and largely determined by individual positioning.

### Democracy in doubt: explanatory propositions

Thailand's haphazard history of military interventionism and incomplete redemocratisation requires an effort to provide clear explanations. Separately or in combination, these explanations are best understood against the background of the destabilising thrust of Reynolds and Team's (2012) 'un-state' and its challenge to simplistic correlations between institutions and outcomes.

Thus my first main explanatory proposition relates to *persistent unease about threats to the monarchy*, which has been regularly used to justify military interventions in ways that are culturally potent. The coup of September 2006 was the latest to rely on this elite justification for overthrowing an elected government. As the symbolic heart of the nation, the institution of the monarchy—and particularly King Bhumibol—can be mobilised for political purposes. Throughout the twentieth century, bold assertions of military fealty became part of the symbiosis between palace and army interests. Their mutual purposes, and habitual wariness of potentially disloyal elements in Thai society, fertilised a close intimacy between the royal family and military leaders. King Bhumibol has peppered his inner circle with military leaders, including figures who have been active in coup politics, such as General Prem. Hewison (2008) explains the links between the symbolic and practical defence of the monarchy through the mobilisation of unrivalled discursive resources, especially in the context of the 2006 coup. When explicitly anti-monarchy sentiments have emerged, as they did during the communist insurgency of the 1970s, and more recently during Red Shirt protests in April–May 2010, the military has required even less justification for its defence of the royals.

Second, Thai decision-makers have remained *relatively tolerant of military interventions*. The military has not faced the level of resistance that has been so widely reported in other places, including neighbouring Burma. Again, this can be partly explained by the close links between the military and the monarchy. The aura of royal benevolence and power has often been transferred to the military as it has sought to present itself as the linchpin for guaranteeing the security of society and its key institutions. Nonetheless, the post-2006 efforts to criminalise critical comments on the governance of Thai society, and especially the political role of the royal family, have dented the impression of relaxed attitudes (Streckfuss 2011). But, overall, it has often helped the military, especially since the 1990s, that it has been able to position its interventions as 'pro-democratic' in nature.

Third, *relations among economic elites* have remained a crucial element of the culture of military interventionism. The recalibration of economic power is

an almost inevitable post-coup outcome, going right back to 1932. Some early episodes of military intervention saw the large-scale redistribution of assets and commercial influence. More recently—such as in 1991 and 2006—coups have been justified by the need to undermine dominant economic players (Pasuk and Baker 2008). Attacks on the wealth accumulated by elected politicians, often described euphemistically as ‘unusual’ (*pid bokati*), have given extra impetus to the rectitude of military coups. In the case of Thaksin, his telecommunications fortune—a product of shrewd manipulation of government contracts and concessions—was an obvious target. Given widespread suspicions about Thaksin’s massive wealth, the government did not even feel the need to offer a detailed explanation when it froze billions of dollars of his assets (Political Desk 2007). Thaksin continues to fight to clear his name of what he describes as ‘politically motivated’ corruption charges.

Fourth, Thailand has received *sustained international support*, most notably from the USA. Since World War II, the USA has become the primary security and political guarantor for the Thai state. Anderson and Mendiones (1985) call this period Thailand’s ‘American era’. More specifically, the USA and other foreign governments have played key roles in the legitimation and fortification of the royal family and its military backers. At times—especially from the 1950s to the 1980s—resources from Western countries were instrumental in efforts to buttress these institutions (Ruth 2011). International disquiet about Thailand’s coups has thus usually been muted. This can be further explained by judgements made at the highest levels of international politics about the importance of a secure Thailand. During the cold war, the USA could not afford to see Thailand ‘lost’ to communist advances and infiltration. More recently, the need to safeguard international trade and transportation against terrorism and other threats has ensured that Thailand is fully entangled in the Western security orbit. Regular exchanges of military personnel, the most public of which occur under the annual banner of the Cobra Gold military exercises, mean that Thai military leaders are very familiar with their Western counterparts. At the same time, Thailand has a well-resourced and effective foreign service. It is widely considered a successful agent for the Thai national interest, and specifically for the defence of the monarchy. Importantly, it has also been effective in explaining Thailand’s occasional coups to Western capitals.

Given these four explanatory propositions, Thailand may struggle to cultivate an elite political culture where coups would be unacceptable. At this stage, coups clearly still play a major role in Thai mainstream politics. Episodic redemocratisation has not led to the final consolidation of a democratic system, and wariness about electoral outcomes remains very strong, especially among those with the political and materiel capabilities to launch coups. It is, after all, senior military leaders, and specifically the top army generals, who need to be convinced that direct political interventions do not serve their purposes. Each year, Thailand tends to experience at least one period of frenzied coup speculation. In a pattern that goes back many decades, the standard response

sees military officers publicise their denials, which are choreographed to leave sceptical minds guessing.

Under these circumstances, the likelihood of another coup may diminish in certain periods but is unlikely to disappear completely. Given its globalised economy and centrality to international networks, Thailand would struggle if it lurched into a period of long-term authoritarianism such as Burma did from 1962 to 2010. The geopolitical conditions which made it possible in the twentieth century to sustain long periods of military rule—where support from the USA, or the Soviet Union and/or China, was likely to follow—appear now to have faded. Military dictatorship, especially if there was no prospect of an early return to civilian rule, would come with significant consequences. Even Abhisit Vejjajiva (2007), a man who benefited directly from the 2006 coup and from military meddling in 2008, acknowledged the risk of international sanctions and related opprobrium. Nonetheless, Thailand's elite coup culture continues to produce high levels of political uncertainty. Few would have ever guessed that within five years of the 2006 military intervention, a Shinawatra would be back in Thailand's prime ministerial suite, and that she would be named Yingluck. Given the potential for even greater turbulence in Thai society, and the implications of the defence of the monarchy outlined in this article, it would be imprudent to bet that the 2006 coup was Thailand's final experience of military intervention. Across very different historical periods, the coup has remained an attractive option for palace and military figures hoping to preserve their entitlements and interests.

### Conclusions

So is this why Thai democracy appears to struggle? The answer is nested in the peculiar, even ad hoc, arrangements of elite culture and politics that have been consolidated during the twentieth, and now the twenty-first, century. Certainly there are other countries, including near neighbours like Burma and Indonesia, where coups have occurred at important junctures of their development as nation states. The influence of the armed forces in those two countries has also remained strong. But Thailand's elite coup culture is different. The persistence of coup-making, long after democratic institutions were assumed to be robust, indicates that some of the fundamental structures of Thai political life have not been shifted by burgeoning democratic instincts. Instead, in much the way that Reynolds and Team (2012) outlined the entwinement of political influences in their model of the Thai 'un-state', there is constant jockeying and rearrangement, all within a system where circumscriptions, at different levels, are well understood. To this end, the argument of this article is that the persistence of military interventionism in Thai society is explained by the links between the army and the palace, by the relative tolerance of Thai decision-makers for coups, by relations among economic elites and by the consistent support that all

governments—even military governments—have received from foreign partners. In this context, the role of the USA—as a key economic, political and military backer of the Thai system—cannot be exaggerated. The acquiescence of US governments to the interventionism of the Thai armed forces, including in 2006, has ensured that any stigma associated with military government never overwhelmed international acceptance.

It is this international acceptance of the military's involvement in Thai politics that warrants serious questioning. Clearly, this acceptance is the product of long-term and dogged efforts to present Thailand as a peaceful and progressive society even while remnants of authoritarianism, whether driven by the palace or the army, still provide certain advantages. It is the reliability of this system, notwithstanding its *apparent* susceptibility to wild fluctuations in political control, which has ensured that international actors accede to the vicissitudes of the elite coup culture. In some foreign capitals, sporadic embarrassment in response to yet another military intervention might be considered a small price for the friendship, access and tolerance provided by Thai military and palace authorities. For countries such as the USA, the record shows that a coup is insufficient justification for abandoning Thailand's royal and military power brokers.

Post-coup grumbles have, in the years since 2006, been replaced by much deeper anxieties about the future of the Thai polity once King Bhumibol is no longer on the throne. The prevailing coup culture is largely a product of his reign and the deliberate symbiosis that has drawn military leaders into his circle. It is unclear whether any future monarch could so consistently rely on the military to support royal interests alongside its own. The final phase of King Bhumibol's reign has thus led some Thais to ask uncomfortable questions about the roles of the palace and the military in politics. In the uncertain period ahead, the long history of coups will continue to shape Thailand's political culture and the behaviour of its elite actors. At moments when democratic institutions are put under pressure, there is a chance that new compromises could emerge, and respect for electoral mandates might follow. The alternative is that the Thai military, and perhaps the palace, may never be prepared to accept any diminished status. The risk of smaller budgets, political marginalisation and less prestige could prove too much to bear. That could mean continued justification for occasional coups—and that new generations will become acculturated to military interventionism in a system where elite decision-makers have only haphazardly embraced the democratic ideal.

## Notes

1. I am very grateful to the journal's anonymous reviewer, who provided thoughtful advice on the argument of this piece.
2. Coups are so persistent that the phenomenon of coup-making stretches across periods when the country was known by a different name. It was Siam until 1939, and formally known by

- that name once again from 1945 to 1949. In recognition of the long-term, sometimes interchangeable and continuing use of both Thai and Siam by Thai speakers, this article uses the historically appropriate term for each period.
3. The number of ‘coups’ (*batiwat* or *rat-prahan*) and ‘rebellions’ (*gabot*) in Thailand’s twentieth- and twenty-first-century history is somewhat contested, although 19 is now the widely reported consensus (Farrelly 2011).
  4. There are some exceptions. In the September 1985 coup attempt, four people, including two foreign journalists, were killed (Cummings-Bruce 1985). But according to Chalidaporn (1991, 166): ‘This was quite unusual for the normally bloodless coups in the history of Thai politics’.
  5. Yellow (King Bhumibol’s ‘birth colour’) is now most closely associated with anti-Thaksin protests. It is worth noting that during 2005 and most of 2006, the colour was used to mark the celebrations for the sixtieth anniversary of King Bhumibol’s coronation. At this time, Prime Minister Thaksin regularly wore a ‘yellow shirt’, even though after the coup he has been aligned with the opposite camp, the ‘reds’.

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