

REVIEW

Democracy in Thailand

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Summary: Democracy is an alien concept to Thailand. This study analyzes the possibilities for democratic action in the kingdom using a 7-question framework for analysis. The study concludes with the prospects for democracy in the kingdom.

Summary of method: The framework for analyzing democracy in Southeast Asia has seven questions as follows: (1) Are there regularly held elections that are free and fair in the country? (2) Are there external or foreign observers of the elections? (3) Are the ballot boxes stuffed openly or secretly? (4) Are the voters bribed in any way before or during the elections? (5) Is the vote secret? (6) Are there secret police operating beyond the law? (7) Are there Opposition parties that can freely take part in elections with low barriers to entry? The study uses two main original tables to record the history of grassroots activism and General Elections since 1969 and supplement the framework.

Keywords: democracy, analysis, Political Science, Siam, feudalism, debt slavery, Thailand, public policy, corruption, Rama kings, Taksin Shinawatra, Prayuth Chan-o-Cha

Introduction

Siam the former name for Thailand, the Land of the Free. For over 700 years, Siam was ruled by an absolute monarch. This means that slavery existed. If there was slavery, then there were no rights. Slavery in ancient Siam was inherited from the Ayutthaya era, where it was common to have many slaves depending on one's position and status. The anti-slavery movement began in 1874 and continued until 1905. Slavery was only *de facto* outlawed in 1905 but *de jure* by 1915. Slavery meant no civil liberties or human rights. Children born to slaves were slaves themselves. There was no opting out of slavery. Up until the time of King Chulalongkorn the Great (Rama V), slaves could not buy themselves out of bondage. Slavery was only criminalized in the Penal Code of 1908 (Section 269). Finally, it was outlawed 12 years later, in 1915.

Slavery in Siam was often about debt. Rama V abolished slavery in a declaration known as *sakdina*. However, this did not occur overnight. Freedom from the feudalistic practice of debt slavery took decades to be activated. *Sakdina* was

also part of Chulalongkorn's strategy to modernize Siam. But Rama V took a long time to abolish slavery because it would antagonize the slave-owning noble class on whom the king's power depended.

This continued until the bloodless 1932 coup, but the conversion from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional one only took effect in 1935 when Rama VII signed the document (1). One of those in the coup group was Plaek Phibunsongkhram, or Field Marshal Phibun. He became the third PM of Thailand in 1938 before the outbreak of World War II. A decade later, he became PM again, but because of corruption and political violence, he was ousted in 1957. King Bhumiphon Adulyadej (Rama IX) became king in 1946. In total, Phibun served 15 years as PM, making him the longest serving PM of Thailand. Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat staged a coup in 1957, replacing Plaek Phibunsongkhram as the fourth PM, but died suddenly in 1963. Under Sarit, the constitutional monarchy was rejuvenated, and *ipso facto*, the king was seen on television and heard on radio and became very popular among the people.

The cunning and guile of bhumiphon adulyadej (Rama IX)

Rama IX was present for all the various coups, all 21 of them, and mostly bloodless coups. In Thailand, the king's assent must be given for a coup to take place. This was how the military held sway over the king and vice versa. Even though Thaksin had been democratically elected twice, Rama IX still allowed his generals to overthrow him. This was because Thaksin was so popular that it threatened the king's own position, as several NeoMarxist Thai scholars, such as Tithifruit Nangawoodwan (University of the Prince of Songkhla), Thanet Apulapongpun (Northern Chiangmai University), and Pornititburi (King Naresuan College of Sciences) pointed out. While the king was always surrounded by many generals, prime ministers, and ministers, he was the only one who survived.

After the democratically elected prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra was overthrown illegally in the 2006 coup, the military has been slowly eroding the democratic aspects of the 1997 Constitution (Table 1). When the military junta overthrew his sister prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra in 2014, the despot General Prayuth Chan-o-Cha modified the Thai Constitution into what became a pro-military Constitution. Recall that only in the 1997 and 2007 Constitutional Charters was the Senate ceremoniously "elected" and then "half elected," respectively. The new pro-military Constitution provides for all Senators to be appointed by the military junta. The 2017 Constitution requires all military MPs to declare their membership in the Royal Thai Armed Forces (RTAF). Among the first ASEAN members to support Chan-o-Cha's illiberal (but not illegal) regime was Singapore. The Chan-o-Cha coup was not illegal, even though it was undemocratic. It was not illegal because it was sanctioned by the Thai king (Rama IX).

Prayuth Chan-o-Cha

Chan-o-Cha, the self-proclaimed authoritarian dictator, is widely considered a gangster among journalists, as he jokingly threatened "to have journalists shot" if they did not report the right news. He said he was joking, but no one laughed. After he illegally seized power in 2014 (albeit with the blessings of the late and beloved King Bhumiphon Adulyadej), he promised that he would hold elections "soon." By "soon" he meant only after the three events were achieved: (1) military martial law; (2) a new military-designed Constitution to replace the democratic 1997 Constitution; and (3) after all the potential, pro-military Senators and MPs for the 2019 GE were identified.

Meanwhile, leading Thai newspapers carry reports suggesting the Election Commission (EC) engineered the political system under unelected junta chief Prayuth Chan-o-Cha. The evidential complicity of the EC with the junta,

TABLE 1 | General elections.

Year	Political parties	Remarks
1969 GE	United Thai people's party (UTPP) Democrat party	Thanom Kittikachorn elected PM in spite of widespread systemic political corruption
1975 GE	Democrat party 17.2%	Seni Pramroj elected PM Democrat party wins
2001 GE	Thai Rak Thai (TRT) 39.91% Chuan Leek Pai 25.86%	Thaksin wins and elected PM
2005 GE	Thai Rak Thai (TRT) 60.48% Banyat Bantadtan (Democrat party) 22.96%	Landslide victory for TRT Mrs. Sudarat Keyuraphan (TRT) banned for 5 years
March 14, 2019 GE	Palang Pracharath 23.34% Phue Thai 21.92% Future forward party	Mrs. Sudarat Keyuraphan (Phue Thai) fails to win by a small margin; Prayuth Chan-o-Cha wins as independent
May 14, 2023	Phue Thai Palang Pracharath United Nation Party (Chan-o-Cha)	Awaiting the result of the post-house speaker election and the new coalition government-elect

the top Thai businesses, and the political elite Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit sold shares in his own company to his mother so that he could run for election as is required by law. Despite this, the RTEC still declared that he had defaulted. Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit now faces the prospect of a year's ban from politics, losing his MP seat, and a 10 year incarceration in a Thai prison (Table 2). The billionaire Thanathorn also faces a criminal charge of sedition and another for cybercrime for a speech he made on Facebook criticizing the military government in 2015 and 2018, respectively. But because the entire system is highly corrupt, Thanathorn has not been served a RTEC warrant of arrest, even as late as 2023 (Table 2). Another reason why social scientists inside and outside Thailand argue that there is corruption in the RTEC is because of the recently revised formula used to calculate the proportion of the national vote. In 2019, the Thai Parliament illegally allocated 150 "party seats according to the political parties shares." The revised formula basically re-allocates one seat to each of the political parties. This is how complex, complicated, and corrupt the Thai system continues to be that even a billionaire can be kept in political wilderness and in some form of limbo. According to local political scientists, such complications would benefit the incumbent PM Chan-o-Cha.

The *junta* has been working since 2014, or over 5 years, to identify and groom suitable Senators and MPs (2). (Table 2) However, leading Thai political scientists believe that some pro-junta Senators and MPs have refused to sign up. This is part of the reason why Chan-o-Cha dumped the Palang

TABLE 2 | Grassroots demonstrations as evidence of democratic action.

Year	Main actors	Causes
September 1970	(1) Chulalongkorn student protestors against government (2) Three Chulalongkorn professors' corruption allegations	Corruption at several major university campuses according to <i>farang</i> -based political sociologists
September 1971 Bangkok Thornburi	(1) Katoey protestors	Demanding rights for transvestites and legal marriage for transvestites
Mid-1970s	(1) Farmers Federation of Thailand (FFT) (2) General Thanom Kittikachorn	Revolt against PM Thanom Kittikachorn
1972–1973 Bangkok	(1) Student protestors	Boycotting Japanese goods
October 14, 1973	(1) RTP (Bangkok) (2) Farmers	RTP killing of 70 pro-democracy demonstrators Killing of protest leaders
December 12, 1975 Thammasat University, Chulalongkorn University, Ramkhamhaeng University, Mahidon University, and Chiang Mai University Pattani Provincial Hall	(1) Various kingdom-wide university student protestors (2) RTP kills six Muslim students and throw their bodies into the river; one Muslim survivor told the other (3) Civil Rights Protection Center (CRPC) (4) Pattani United Liberation Organization (PULO)	(1) 3,000 protestors (2) 11–25 dead and 30–40 injured
October 6, 1976 Thammasat University and Sanam Luang	(1) Law students (2) Faculty protestors	45 dead (according to Thongchai Winichakul's book)
March 1974 to August 1975	(1) FFT leaders (2) Professional assassins	21 FFT leaders assassinated
October 25, 2004 Tak Bai Mosque Narathiwat	(1) Muslim insurgents (2) RTP killings	(1) 85 Muslims killed (2) 2009 inquest showed that the RTP officers had done their duty by the law
2009 Krue Se mosque Pattani Attacks on 11 police posts	10 victims were members of a Muslim family whose home in Yala province	(1) 107 Muslim terrorists killed in mosque
March to May 2010 Bangkok	(1) Security forces (2) Anti-government protesters United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) or the red shirts	At least 90 people died and more than 2,000 wounded Arson attacks causing billions of dollars of damage

(Continued)

TABLE 2 | (Continued)

Year	Main actors	Causes
May 17, 2010 Bangkok	(1) Government sniper (2) Seh Daeng	Assassination of rebel general Khattiya Sawasdipol
October 14, 2014	(1) Tattap Ruangprapaikitseree (Sec-Gen, PP) (2) People's party	Demonstrations against Prayuth Chan-o-Cha claiming more power to amend the constitution.
November 14, 2020 Democracy Monument	(1) King Maha Vajiralongkorn (2) Prayuth Chan-o-Cha (3) Panusaya Sithijirawattanakul – one of the protest leaders	Demanding King's abdication Demanding PM's resignation
2020–2021 Bangkok	(1) Prayuth Chan-o-Cha (2) Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit	(1) Changes to the Thai constitution in 2017 (2) Government dissolution of Future Forward Party (FFP) in February 2020 (3) FFP critical of Chan-o-Cha
August 11, 2021 Bangkok	(1) Prayuth Chan-o-Cha (2) RTP	PM Chan-o-Cha's mismanagement of COVID situation
April 15, 2023 Songkhla	(1) Unknown shooters (2) RTP	No casualties. Ramadan shooting at different police stations. No one was working so no injuries

Pracharath military party for a new political party in February 2023. The entire situation is also a big political setback for the conservative elite in Bangkok, represented by the Democrat Party (DP) (Table 1). The DP was then led by the Oxford-educated Abhisit Vejjajiva, and he was poised to move the DP as a powerful alternative political party to the Palang Pracharath. The DP also lost the greatest number of seats in its entire history as the oldest political party in Thailand. One commentator said that it was Chan's idea to remove the DP from the political map of Thailand and replace it with the Palang Pracharath military party. Therefore, all the traditional areas under the DP were supposed to fall into the Palang Pracharath Party's hands (Table 1). It should be noted here that the Democratic Front is entirely different from the DP, with the latter being supported by the "old money" anti-Thaksin elite.

Cult of personality and *lèse-majesté*

Much has been written about the Cult of Personality of Rama IX, but virtually nothing about previous Siamese kings adopting such a posture. The cult of personality was maintained by the monarchy to ensure that no one could

lower the status of the king or make fun of his strange habits and dress code. The cult is demonstrated by the huge billboards that line up the shopping malls and adorn the side walls of skyscrapers in Bangkok. These giant billboards are also found along the tollways and expressways to the airports. When Thai citizens pass by the photograph of the king and his family, they immediately pause to wai the king. A wai is a means of greeting, but it is also about paying respect to someone who is greater in status or someone who is dead.

The cult of personality was developed by the king and his generals in the 1950s in order to make the symbolic monarchy more powerful, and indeed, it did so *ipso facto*. Note that *lèse-majesté* goes hand in glove with the cult of personality. No one else but myself has made that claim. The *lèse-majesté* has a maximum penalty of 15 years incarceration for each charge. Many thousands have been charged under that article, but there have also been many, including *farang* who have been pardoned. Social media then takes over to show how magnanimous and benevolent the king is. So far, the new king (Rama X) has not made use of Article 112 or *lèse-majesté* against anyone from the ethnographic record. The corrupt prime minister Chan-o-Cha, however, has threatened to make use of Article 112 against his enemies.

Conclusion

The framework for analysis shows that Elections have been held regularly in Thailand, but only in some years. But there have not been regular elections due to the military triumvirate in the 1950s and 1960s, where three different Field Marshalls appeared to take turns in running the kingdom. There have also never been any foreign observers in Thai elections. Taksin Shinawatra was known to give out billions of baht in his 2001 and 2006 GE campaigns. Most voters expect to be bribed with 350–500 baht before an election. Taksin used to request voters to sign up for his party, and each new signee was given 550 baht.

Local activists interviewed by the author and his research assistants in November 2022 while at the Faculty of Political Science at Chulalongkorn University declared that the new king, Maha Vajiralongkorn (Rama X), was now demanding radical changes to the already beleaguered Thai Constitution in an attempt to furiously seize more Executive Power for himself in order to completely control the Crown Property Bureau (CPB). The Thai CPB was once headed by

Prem Tinsulanonda, who has since died and left a political vacuum in the CPB. The CPB manages the royal fortune of over US\$60 billion, which is the big prize that Rama X has set his eyes on. In the process, he potentially sits on a total wealth mountain estimated between US\$60 and 70 billion. In Thailand, there will be more complexity and more power left up for grabs after the May 14th GE (3). Thailand had several opportunities to become the most democratic state on mainland Southeast Asia, but the old king and his generals did not accept it for over 70 years; and the people loved the old king too much to question his “cult of personality.” The chances of democracy taking root today are even more unlikely with the current king.

There have been too many coups in Thailand under the constitutional monarchy for it to be considered democratic. Even though many political parties appear overnight, it does not mean that the country is democratic since Opposition leaders such as Seh Daeng have been assassinated. Ballot box stuffing means that the vote has never really been secret in Thailand. Overall, it means that Thailand is not well on its way to becoming a democracy due to systemic corruption and the military’s manipulation of the Constitution and the legal system to benefit Chan-o-Cha’s *junta*. A total of at least 400 student protestors, including Muslims deemed terrorists from Narathiwat and Yala provinces, have been confirmed killed between 1970 and 2023. Hundreds of thousands of demonstrators, including students, faculty, Red Shirts, Yellow Shirts, RTP, and RTAF officers, have been involved in various killings from the north of the kingdom to the Bangkok BTS system in the South. The total number of Muslims killed in the South is estimated to be over 5,500. Grassroots activism and political violence are markers of democratic action and, hence, part of the making of a democracy. Therefore, at best, one can claim that Thailand does have a chance of becoming a genuine democracy in the distant future, but not before the generals retire and the monarchy falls.

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