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## Thailand's Military Dictatorship Endangered By Impassioned Students

*The small nation is in the grips of a clownish general and its people are demanding change. We should listen to them.*

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Six years ago, the clownish General Prayuth Chan-ocha seized power in Thailand. His first act as dictator was to deploy military entertainers around the country to herald his illegal usurpation of power. Don't worry, be happy, they proclaimed. The messiah-wannabe treated his country as an exotic location in a Gilbert and Sullivan comic opera.

Yet Prayuth was serious about repression. He arrested opponents, forced critics to attend "attitude adjustment" sessions, made television stations carry his weekly show, and warned journalists that he could order them to be shot. His erratic behavior brought to mind Uganda's Idi Amin, albeit without the latter's many cruel, shameless murders.

After the nominal reestablishment of democracy, Prayuth is still in power. However, he has lost influence over the armed forces with his ascension in nominally civilian politics. Prayuth shares power with King Maha Vajiralongkorn, the former playboy crown prince who spends much of his time in Germany counting his billions and enjoying members of his harem, and the new military hierarchy, in which hardliners allied with the king are ascendant. Now tens of thousands of Thais are taking to the streets in protest against this self-serving triumvirate.

Thailand was an important U.S. military ally during the Vietnam War. Once known as Siam, it remained independent as Western imperialist powers gobbled up colonies nearby. In 1932, a military coup overturned the absolute monarchy. Since then, Thai politics have tended toward the tempestuous, with 12 coups and 20 constitutions.

The current military junta traces its roots back to 2001. Politics was then dominated by a traditional business-oriented elite that was comfortable with the special and highly profitable position of the military and court. (For instance, Prayuth's family has enjoyed lucrative army contracts.) Left out were the poor, marginalized, and disadvantaged.

Along came billionaire Thaksin Shinawatra, who played the populist card, winning election in 2001 and 2005. There was much to criticize in his policies, but what most angered his opponents was that they were out of power and the wrong people were benefiting from government. In 2006, the military staged a coup while Thaksin was out of the country. In 2008, he was convicted of corruption in absentia in a show trial. The military also dissolved his party and banned him and many of his allies from participating in politics.

However, once democracy was reestablished, his successor parties continued to win elections, eventually elevating his sister, Yingluck Shinawatra, to power. The military, establishment elites, and royalist mobs obstructed the government at every turn. Finally, in 2014, Generalissimo Prayuth strutted forth and declared another military takeover. He preached happiness while jailing anyone who criticized him or otherwise offended his dignity. Some people disappeared, detained secretly. Critics and protesters faced a mix of charges, ranging from sedition to cybercrime to lese majeste. Military tribunals handled many cases, with extraordinary conviction rates.

While jailing those who failed to kowtow, Prayuth whined incessantly. Newspapers “made me lose my manners and have ruined my leader image,” he whimpered, threatening, “I will shut them down for real. I cannot allow them to continue their disrespect.” If people were “harsh” towards him, he said, “I will have to be harsh in return.” He ordered the arrest of those who mocked him on Facebook: “They can’t make fun of me.” Any form of symbolic protest, including publicly reading George Orwell’s *1984*, wearing a T-shirt with a political message, and making the Hunger Games three-finger salute, merited detention. He was a dictator—a whingeing, carping, grouching dictator, but a dictator nonetheless.

He promised new elections but created a constitution designed to keep the military in power. Last year, a vote was finally held with the results fixed even before the poll was called. As *The Economist* noted, the generals “have spent the past five years methodically rigging the system to ensure that the will of voters is thwarted, or at least fiercely circumscribed.” And so it was.

Prayuth used bodies controlled by military henchmen—250 junta-appointed members of the Senate, the junta-selected Election Commission, and the junta-chosen Constitutional Court—to gerrymander districts, outlaw opposition parties, file charges against hostile politicians, and steal MPs from regime opponents. In today’s Thai system, democracy is but a façade, acting as lip gloss for the dictatorship in place of the pig.

In last year’s rigged vote, the Future Forward party run by the young billionaire Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit took a disproportionate share of the youth vote in his forthright campaign against military rule and in favor of cutting the military budget. So Prayuth turned loose his nominally civilian factotums to disqualify Thanathorn’s party and charge the party leader with sedition. The military would destroy anyone who challenged its dictatorial rule.

Which essentially left Thailand’s youth with but one option: protest. Thaksin’s supporters were always hobbled by the fact that rural folks could not easily travel to Bangkok, the distant national capital. Students faced no such disability. Moreover, it was easy for establishment elites to dismiss the efforts of rural bumpkins to be heard. Students, many children of the elites, were harder to ignore. The effort began slowly and was slowed by the coronavirus pandemic, but last week protestors began gathering daily. In response, Prayuth and his junta colleagues instituted a state of emergency, followed by even more desperate attempts at repression.

More than 80 protest leaders have been arrested. Gatherings of more than five people have been banned. Riot police have been deployed. Roads have been blocked. Public transit has been

closed. The increasingly desperate authorities mulled suspending the app Telegram and censoring television coverage. The regime threatened two-year jail terms for simply posting a selfie at a rally or visiting a protest website. Major General Yingyos Thepjumngong, speaking for the police and thus the junta, declared: “It is like you are taking your own evidence of disobeying the emergency decree” But still the demonstrators came.

Even more ominous for the junta, the protests spread and attracted youths of privilege, non-students, including elderly and civil servants, and others never before politically active. Twenty-three-year-old Perakarn Tangsamritkul told the *New York Times*: “Now I understand why we have to be here. We have to speak out.”

The junta’s brutality encouraged further opposition. For instance, a half dozen opposition parties decried the regime’s use of excessive force against peaceful protesters. Hundreds of doctors protested the use of water cannon against demonstrators.

Moreover, with Bangkok’s streets literally aflame, the protests gained international attention. *The Guardian* observed: “Protests also took place in at least 20 other provinces on Sunday, with crowds in many locations shining their phone lights after dark. Solidarity protests were also being held or planned in Europe, the U.S., Canada and Taiwan. Hong Kong activists such as Joshua Wong and Nathan Law sent messages of support.” Human rights groups criticized the junta’s tactics, while foreign governments expressed concern and watchfulness.

Protesters will not be satisfied by platitudes. As one student told the *New York Times*: “The goal is to change the whole political system, including the monarchy and the prime minister.” Demonstrators are demanding the resignation of the buffoon Prayuth and the dissolution of his parliament of shells. Reformers have also called for a new, truly democratic constitution that ends the junta’s rule.

More dramatically, students are taking on the monarchy. The new king grabbed control of heretofore public assets worth \$30 to \$40 billion, asserted personal command over two Bangkok-based military units, and spends most of his time at a German resort accompanied by a retinue of servants and concubines. An unnamed aide told *The Economist* that his priorities are to “bike, f\*ck, eat. He does only those three things.” The group Free Youth observed that “it is clear now the government has intentionally used the monarchy as a tool to get rid of those who are calling out for their better future, the future with equality and no more disparity.” Royalists who unhesitatingly defended the late king have had more trouble embracing his corrupt, licentious successor.

The regime retains the traditional tools of repression but has grown fearful. Prayuth warned that the country could be “engulfed in flames.” However, the protest genie cannot be stuffed back in the bottle. Mass repression would be costly, perhaps disastrous: the memories of past brutality hang over military rule. Some establishment figures are seeking an out. For instance, Chuan Leekpai, a former prime minister who presides over the rigged parliament, called for an informal cross-party consultation. Government spokesman Anucha Burapachaisri allowed that “the government wants to talk to find a way out together.”

That might require a political sacrifice to the democratic dragon. The obvious candidate would be Prayuth, hated by democracy advocates and out of favor within the military and court. Appointing a less obnoxious premier might buy the junta some time.

Washington has only limited influence in Bangkok. The U.S. should emphasize the importance of democratic governance and restrict U.S.-Thai military cooperation, and especially new arms sales, absent genuine movement toward a freer political system. America fears greater Thai cooperation with China, but increased Sino ties are inevitable. And if Bangkok is so ready to abandon the U.S., it cannot be counted on in a crisis. Standing with dictators against citizens would also leave the U.S. on the wrong side when the Thai people finally prevail, as they almost certainly will.

Moreover, American business needs to stop pimping for the dictatorship. For instance, *Forbes* has infamously played up to the regime, inviting the uninspiring Prayuth to speak and seeking financial support from the junta for its conferences. Better for U.S. companies to choose Thailand's democratic future over its authoritarian past.

For years—decades, really—Thailand's abusive elites have prospered at the expense of the public. As a result, the country has been in varying degrees of political turmoil for two decades. The long-inevitable crisis has finally arrived.

Demand for political change has exploded. Support for the regime has thinned. Criticism of corrupt elites has broadened. The credibility of the military junta has tanked. The status of the monarchy has crashed. People of good will around the world should support the Thai people as they seek liberty and demand democracy.

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