Thailand
THAILAND IN 2013
Haunted by the History of a Perilous Tomorrow

Nicholas Farrelly

Raw Wounds

Thailand in 2013 once again faced the ghosts of its recent and turbulent past. As Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra sought to further consolidate the political control her Pheua Thai Party achieved at the 2011 election, struggles to determine the distribution of power among the country’s social, political and economic elite intensified. In the long-running battle to define the future of Thailand — and the role of popular electoral mandates in the country’s governance — the aggressive tactics of anti-government forces broke an uneasy and unstable stalemate. It was the mobilization of large-scale anti-government protests in November and December 2013 that left the country in a difficult position at year’s end. The aim of toppling the “Thaksin regime” remained unfulfilled while many of the most powerful forces in the kingdom have made clear their discomfort with the deposed Prime Minister’s continued popularity and perceived political meddling. Thaksin’s use of the Pheua Thai government as a vehicle for his ambitions to return to Thailand and undo the damage of the 2006 coup remain central to a power struggle that will soon enter its second decade. As the end of King Bhumibol Adulyadej’s reign looms, the expectations of further violence and instability are sparking new flashpoints. At the same time significant violence continues in the southern-most provinces, with no signs of immediate diminution.

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Uprising Redux

The catalyst for the anti-government uprising in Bangkok towards the end of 2013 may well have been accidental, or at least the result of clumsy miscalculation. The Pheua Thai government introduced legislation to grant amnesties to a wide variety of figures implicated in the past decade’s political turbulence with the knowledge that, as before, Thaksin’s inclusion among those to be exonerated would be contentious. This deal was the product of some negotiation between the government and other powerful forces, particularly the army. It would have significant advantages for Thaksin but others would similarly benefit. However, a number of different groups, including “yellow” and “red” street forces, made the determination, for their own reasons, that the amnesty was inappropriate. In November 2013, The Economist reported that “[t]he government’s latest attempt to get Thaksin Shinawatra back has united almost everyone against it”. On the one hand there were those “yellow” elements, consistently supportive of the palace and the Democrat Party, who found it impossible to countenance Thaksin’s return to the kingdom as a free man. Led by southern Thai provincial strongman, former Deputy Prime Minister Suthep Thaugsuban, they still hope that Thaksin will be jailed for abuse of power during his Prime Ministership. On the other hand, pro-Thaksin “reds”, including some of the most radical voices, opposed the amnesty for the way it would forgive the alleged crimes of those who ordered and implemented the crackdown on protestors in April and May 2010. Those violent incidents remain raw for many of Thaksin’s closest allies, still traumatized by the killing of “red” protestors.

On both sides, inheritances of historical animosity and distrust motivated opposition to the conciliatory tone of the amnesty bill. For Prime Minister Yingluck the amnesty offered a chance to reconcile a variety of powerful forces and to support the longevity of her government. Since her election in 2011 she has worked assiduously to cultivate acceptance among the army leadership and other powerbrokers that could end her government with judicial or military interventions. The amnesty provided one opportunity for different elite factions to support a mutually beneficial arrangement that would give confidence to their interlocking deals. It may have been predicated on the mutual recognition that during the challenging years that may follow the death of King Bhumibol Adulyadej a modicum of elite unity will be preferable. Different forces have worked to support, and to scupper, that prospect. But the virulence of street-level opposition to the amnesty made such arrangements impossible, and then led to the more sustained anti-government backlash. By the end of the year, major
intersections in Bangkok were being barricaded and fortified for the new battles to come.

In this showdown, the goal of the anti-government forces was simple: to topple the Yingluck government and replace it with a council of unelected elders, often described as “phu di” [good people]. Among leading elements of the Democrat Party there is a persistent reluctance to accept the outcomes of elections, which they have lost to Thaksin-aligned political parties in 2001, 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2011. This track record has justified anti-government interventions of different sorts, including the 2006 military coup and the 2008 “judicial coup.” To diminish Thaksin’s electoral popularity his opponents have sought to delegitimize the value of rural votes, and rural voters. The challenge for his opponents is that while they may claim a “democratic” mantle the popular mandate has, for more than a decade, belonged to Thaksin.

To explain the events of 2013 and adequately explore their complexities, this analysis begins with a treatment of Thaksin’s enduring role in the political system. Both his supporters and detractors proclaim that the Pheua Thai government led by Yingluck is a proxy for Thaksin’s interests. Second, those interests are well explained through the rice pledging policy implemented by Yingluck in 2013. This proved an especially divisive effort to support the agricultural sector and a range of provincial economic interests. Third, opponents of such “policy corruption” were among the most vociferous critics of the proposed amnesty for Thaksin and others implicated in criminal matters emerging from recent political conflict. Their efforts to challenge the government led ultimately to the showdown in Bangkok in the final months of the year. This analysis ends by considering the dramatic events of late 2013 in the context of the country’s long-running political dramas. As anxieties about the end of King Bhumibol’s reign continue to mount it remains unclear that Thailand has the capacity to peaceably manage its ongoing political problems.

Thaksin’s “Proxy” and the Rice Pledge

While the end of the year was punctuated by street protests, through the early period of 2013 the Yingluck government enjoyed the glow of a healthy economic outlook, strong growth in tourism and industry, and a benign political environment characterized by relatively calm and bipartisan sentiments. The appetite for renewed street-level mobilizations did not emerge until the middle of the year when forces implacably opposed to former Thaksin reinvigorated their long campaign to have the Yingluck government dissolved. Their calls for the revocation of Yingluck’s
mandate, based on her status as Thaksin’s “proxy”, gave the entire national political situation its unique flavour. The political dynamics of the Yingluck administration settled into a pattern with Thaksin continuing to play a background role. Thaksin has haunted Thai politics since the coup of September 2006, and his resilience and efforts to remain relevant are shaping the Pheua Thai government’s political prospects. With a commanding majority in parliament, and a popular suite of policies, the Pheua Thai government used 2013 to consolidate its control of the key apparatus of government. Overall the economy began to falter in 2013, with the first recessionary period since the Global Financial Crisis.

Given this background, among the policies that it sought to implement, the rice-pledging scheme was the most contentious. Many economists have expressed deep concern about the way that the rice-pledging scheme has distorted the national economy, and shunted astounding benefits towards some farmers. Early in 2013 there were concerns that the programme was unsustainable. The stockpiling of rice, some of which has reportedly mouldered under tarpaulins, is a sensitive issue, and one that has serious implications for a government struggling to support its base in the rural north and northeast of the country. Writing for The Irrawaddy, Mawaan Macan-Markar suggested the policy “pits a satisfied rural constituency against an irate chorus of economists in Bangkok”. Ensuring that rice farmers are able to secure adequate returns on their crops goes beyond economic matters, and intrudes on the electoral viability of the Yingluck government.

Other economic policies from the Yingluck government echo the monumental and grandiose projects of former Prime Minister Thaksin during the 2001–06 period. Plans for a rapid train between Bangkok and Chiang Mai win clear support among the peoples of the north, while many others consider such expensive infrastructure investment imprudent. The idea that Thailand needs a spurt of infrastructure investment provides the impetus for government policy. Such proposed projects have been challenged by anti-government forces, apprehensive about their potential to undermine the economy more generally while supporting narrower sectoral interests in certain rural areas. They are perceived to work merely to the electoral advantage of Yingluck, Thaksin and their allies. Yet, as Andrew Walker has argued, “[s]trong economic growth, and increasing government spending on health, welfare and rural development, didn’t start with Thaksin, but he and his allies have been able to effectively place growing prosperity at the heart of their political success”. The political implications of this longer-term economic trajectory are significant. They help to explain why the virulence of anti-Thaksin sentiment is so high among those who have struggled, and failed, against him in open electoral competition.
Amnesty Explosions

It was the amnesty bill, introduced to parliament in late October 2013, which marked the end of the relatively temperate tone in Thai politics that had prevailed since the 2011 election. A growing chorus of outrage abruptly replaced it, with Yingluck caught in this storm of discontent. In short, efforts to pass the amnesty bill faltered when support for reconciliation efforts frayed in response to street-level opposition from across the political spectrum. Tolerance for any reciprocation of compromise was shown to be very thin, as the variety of agitated political forces reinforced themselves with harsh rhetoric, the standard chants of “ook bai” [get out] and new additions to the armoury of protest techniques, including deafening whistle blasts. The amnesty bill proved a lightening rod for the aggrieved parties on all sides: anti-Thaksin partisans found a modicum of common cause when hardline “reds” also found any amnesty for their “yellow” enemies unreasonable.

At a tactical level, for its supporters, the amnesty was framed as an important component of the government’s national reconciliation strategy. For opponents of any leniency to Thaksin, it was derided as a muddled attempt to whitewash his many perceived sins. Other groups also emerged to protest against the proposed amnesty, including many “reds” who were concerned that the government would wipe clean the records of those accused of violence against their comrades in 2010. A number of independent anti-amnesty protest movements emerged in early November in an effort to convince the government to re-think its approach. When the legislation was put to a vote of the Senate it was unanimously defeated. However, the issues at stake in this episode remained cumbersome, and the anti-amnesty revolt quickly transformed into a broader movement to topple the Yingluck government. Yet Thaksin’s allies insist that he has every right to return home and work closely with the government to ensure Thailand’s success. He has been prepared to wait but, as the end of King Bhumibol’s reign looms, it appears unlikely that he will be able to stay away forever. The feverish opposition to any notion of his return does, however, give some sense of the many different cohorts in Thai society that are aggrieved by his potential rehabilitation. In online forums countless millions of comments, tweets and Facebook “likes” have been used to bolster the anti-Thaksin coalition. Out on the streets there was the inevitable violence, with four people killed in clashes between pro- and anti-government groups.

Stepping back from the fray, and considering these events in strategic terms, there are major divisions in political orientation brought into harsh relief by
the amnesty debate. For many Thais the notion that Thaksin can return to the country, or that his sister should continue to govern, remains unconscionable. Their implacable opposition to the Shinawatra dynasty appears to harden with time. Such opposition to the amnesty and the Yingluck government indicates that while high-level power-bickering, especially as led by Yingluck, may be able to constrain some elite bickering, the temperature on the streets has remained high and there is ample fuel for further eruptions of conflict. At the same time, the idea that many “reds” were alienated by the prospect of compromise with the palace and the army is indicative of the “awakening” [ta sawang] that many claim to have experienced. Their interpretations of Thai political history, and especially the role of the monarchy, are challenging the foundations of the orthodox history of monarchical authority.

Royal Rumbles

In this period of such regular political contention, how strong is Thailand’s royal family? After almost a decade of political bickering in which the family has been shaped and re-shaped by various imputations of its legitimacy and authority, members of the palace have been challenged to offer the nation stable leadership under conditions of tension and widespread social conflict. However, ideas of universal adoration of the monarchy have by now been replaced, in most analyses, by the recognition that the political and economic roles of the royal family are now open to the same kind of dissent that awaits non-royal leaders. The palace benefits, naturally, from the aura that many Thais associate with the king himself, but the transfer of his charismatic authority to other members of the family is incomplete and remains contested. In particular, in 2013 there were few indications that Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn has adequately rehabilitated his image in the eyes of the wider public. It has been suggested that his relative fragility may prove a good long-term development for Thailand and for the palace itself, although such arguments are unlikely to win admirers among those whose livelihoods and institutional prestige is closely tied to royal fortunes.

Under these conditions, Thailand has continued to struggle with how best to manage perceived threats to the monarchy. In 2013 prosecutions of lese majeste suspects continued, in a legal system where wounding the royal family was still an egregious threat to “national security”. For instance, in March, Akachai Hongkawan was gaoled for three years and four months, and fined, for distributing parts of a television programme about the monarchy produced in
2010 by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. During the year, some lese majeste prisoners, such as Surachai Danwattananusorn, received royal pardons while others, like Daranee Charnchoengsilpakul, continue to languish in gaol. In November 2013 a court determined that perceived slights against previous kings are also subject to the draconian provisions of the law. Then, at the end of the year, a man whose name was not fully released to the public was convicted of “attempted lese majeste” based on materials found during a search of his computer. The extension of the law in these directions amplifies the climate of anxiety about royal-related commentary. Undertaken in secret, and designed to demoralize the accused, these lese majeste prosecutions have been a persistent and important part of legal and political wrangling since 2006. For a time there was optimism that Yingluck’s government would opt to discontinue the practice of prosecuting perceived enemies of the monarchy in this way. For a variety of reasons, but probably because lese majeste prosecutions provide an ideal opportunity to curry favour with the palace and its zealous backers, the government has apparently condoned ongoing prosecutions. There is also, as ever, the indication that the government does not have full mastery of the relevant bureaucratic machinery.

In this context, King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit’s health has been the subject of much discussion. After being hospitalized in 2009, the king spent years in Sirirat Hospital, where he was a largely silent and distant figure. Sporadic public appearances only reinforced his mystical presence, hovering somewhere between the living and the dead. The inability of the general public to openly discuss these issues has led to ongoing challenges. During this period of potential anxiety about the future of the political system, the military has maintained its composure. The government rebuffed calls for the army to more directly intervene in the challenging political conditions of 2013, and the senior army leadership has declared itself loyal to the government of the day.

The king’s traditional birthday speech in early December gave Thais an indication that his standard invocations of unity and harmony could still temporarily halt the escalating tensions on the streets. King Bhumibol may not have the enthusiasm for bolder interventions that marked earlier periods of his reign, yet the standstill created by his birthday gave at least some chance for the different parties to assess their next steps. For the anti-government movement the need to maintain pressure on Yingluck and seek a further moment of crisis was clearly part of a push to generate conditions for a military intervention. Such an intervention cannot be excluded from consideration, even though the armed forces leadership, and most notably army chief General Prayuth Chan-ocha,
have publicly rejected the notion of another coup. The ignominious track record of the 2006 coup group, which struggled to manage a sophisticated twenty-first century economy and then surrendered power to a pro-Thaksin government in the 23 December 2007 election, is warning enough. There is also a possibility that residual appetites for detente between Yingluck and Prayuth makes the idea of another coup unattractive. The armed forces will likely have what they want, with robust budgets, good promotion prospects and a limited conflict in southern Thailand all converging to help support morale and keep the military economy strong. A rebellion from other officers who perceive themselves to have been disenfranchised by these arrangements is possible.

Right at the end of the year, on 9 December, once the reverent pause for the king’s birthday had ended, and with anti-government groups once again massing on the streets, Prime Minister Yingluck dissolved parliament in the hope of calling new elections. Her patient efforts to provide a democratic outlet for anti-government sentiments were immediately dismissed by opponents. Suthep bellowed that the government remained illegitimate and must be dissolved. For the next day protests grew on the streets, with both sides claiming moral legitimacy. By 17 December, campaigning for the 2 February 2014 poll had commenced. Prime Minister Yingluck launched her campaign for re-election in northeast Thailand while the leadership of the Democrat Party equivocated about its participation in the poll, before finally deciding to boycott. For the Democrat Party the idea of campaigning against Yingluck and losing is apparently less appealing than an effort to challenge the government’s political authority. It is the lack of consensus about the appropriate mechanisms for distributing political power, and a continuing preference for “moral” rather than “popular” leadership, that presents obstacles for quick resolution.

**Regional Relations**

The dramatic events of late 2013 have once again catapulted Thailand into the global spotlight. The international reception of Thailand’s ongoing political dramas is worth explaining in some more detail. In general, the international community sought to support the Yingluck government’s call for new elections on 2 February 2014. Since the coup of 2006 efforts to support the consolidation of democratic culture in the country have added a new dimension to global interactions with Thailand. The conundrum for many who are most enthusiastic about the need for democratic practices is that a minority of the Thai population remains opposed to the party that has tended to prevail at the polls. Under these
conditions there are important opportunities for the foreign media, many of whom took to lampooning the Democrat Party in light of its reputedly anti-democratic tendencies. In such a context the different forces shaping the global reception of Thai politics in the regional political landscape have continued to shift.

Late in the year the International Court of Justice ruled on the Preah Vihear (Phra Wiharn) dispute between Thailand and Cambodia. Since conflict between the two countries in 2011 over this temple compound there has been extra need for the resolution of the long-standing disagreement about the rightful demarcation of parts of the borderline. In November, the ICJ ruled in favour of Cambodia, which will now control the 900-year-old temple complex, while also seeking to develop a consensus about the best ways that cultural custody of the site can be shared. It is reasonable to imagine that over time some level of joint management will emerge, with both sides able to benefit from the tourist and cultural potential of the site. In the aftermath of the ICJ ruling both Prime Minister Yingluck and Cambodia’s Prime Minister Hun Sen were gracious in their public comments. Realizations that further confrontation is unhelpful appear to have gained significant support, although fringe ultra-nationalists in Thailand still take such Thai conciliation as treachery.

However, arguably the most important international trends for Thailand in 2013 focus on the variety of transformations underway in preparation for the ASEAN Economic Community, which will be officially launched in December 2015. Thailand seeks to take a leading role in the configuration of the wider region. These changes are especially important in the context of the different ways that Thailand is coming to grips with Myanmar’s rolling political and economic transformation. The integration of the two countries, for so long uneasy rivals, provides special opportunities for Thailand. Bangkok’s role as the premier mainland Southeast Asia transport and logistics hub offers a platform for rapidly integrating Myanmar into Thai-based distribution and communication networks. Thai companies are moving to capitalize on their proximity to what is arguably Asia’s most important frontier market. Thai companies that have already made the move to Myanmar include such fast-food favourites as Pizza Company and Swensen’s. At the other end of the spectrum Thailand’s investments in the Myanmar oil and gas sector is giving the relationship between the two countries a new impetus. The challenge of managing such a sensitive relationship during Thailand’s period of ongoing instability will be a major preoccupation in the years ahead. During a period when Thailand is likely to remain inward focused, other countries in the region, and especially Myanmar, will seek to capitalize on presenting their relative merits to international investors.
If Myanmar proves to be increasingly competitive and gains the trust of foreign markets, there will be a significant and permanent shift of resources and attention to exploit its potential. Such a scenario has obvious benefits to Thailand, but it could also lead to the re-configuration of the Thai economy, with attendant risks for all involved.

**Uncertainty Still Reigns**

With the end of 2013 nothing was resolved on the streets of Bangkok. For Thailand, the climate of uncertainty has yet to greatly diminish its international standing or economic performance. Instead, society has proved astonishingly resilient, with most Thais continuing to pursue their lives largely immune to the vicissitudes of the high-level politics or its street-level manifestations. These parallel worlds — one defined by relative apathy and the other by the fiercest passions — give the Thai experience of political strife a peculiar character. While worries about the future are accentuated at moments of particular tension there is no sense that the current pattern cannot be maintained. Instead we might expect that further rounds of brinkmanship reinforce the persistence of political crisis.

Yet the stability of the arrangements that have brought the Yingluck government into conversation with parts of the palace and military, and on which the proposed amnesty was predicated, could be the start of positive political changes. The basic principles of political and social re-ordering that are currently underway are presenting different elite factions with opportunities to collaborate. In this context, Thailand’s most astute political commentator hailed the relatively benign character of the 2013 crisis:

> Thailand’s latest bout of political crisis is a major improvement on recent years. The military has not intervened, the airport is unlikely to be shut again, and the judiciary has not disbanded a ruling party. These are the positive signs emerging from Thailand’s democratic learning curve. Thailand must build on this progress as it grapples with the right mix of elected sources of power and unelected centres of moral authority.31

But the idea of “unelected centres of moral authority” hides a deeper set of issues: Thailand’s focus on its core institutions of nation, religion and king has been mythologized, especially during the reign of King Bhumibol, as an all-encompassing story of prestige and success. The economic buoyancy of the past three decades, taken together with the political hardiness of a system prepared to accept internal challenges, has given Thailand a special role in the region. But some of the circumstances that have supported the overall image of Thailand
are beginning to shift radically, with pressures from China and elsewhere in the region becoming more apparent. At the same time the civil strife in the Malay Muslim-majority provinces of the deep south has remained impossible to fix. The prospect of Thai society accommodating all of the different forces that are working at its margins means there is a chance that tomorrow will bring even more significant disruption.

Waves of protest could, under the wrong circumstances, generate the types of conflict and crisis that would challenge even a robust central government. Yingluck aspires to offer such steady leadership but there are obvious questions about her ability to manage the challenges that could emerge. The dramatic events late in 2013 indicate that any notion of resolution to the political strife that has rocked Thailand is premature. There are a number of different outcomes that need to be considered. First, in 2013 talk of escalating civil conflict was a new addition to the common portfolio of speculation. The idea that parts of Thailand may prove irreconcilably opposed to the political sentiments of other Thais could have a greatly destabilizing effect. Second, even if the government of Yingluck can weather the current difficulties, it is likely that future rounds of strife will bring more significant violence. The real challenges to Thailand’s unity, as exposed by the mobilizations of late 2013, are caused by the lack of consensus over the mechanisms that rightfully determine political control. Third, for those who oppose Thaksin, and fail to defeat him at the ballot box, the formula for regaining power has the potential to displace Thailand from its treasured position as one of Southeast Asia’s most successful societies. It is haunted by the spectre of a coup that could, finally and comprehensively, end its claims to a democratic tomorrow.

Notes
1. For a thoughtful discussion of the relevant issues, a Thai-language editorial is helpful: “We vote vs No vote”, Matichon Weekly, 27 December 2013, p. 10.
4. The resurrection of Suthep Thaugsuban’s political status in late 2013 is one of the year’s most remarkable developments. Reviled by many Red Shirts for his role in the crackdown on their protests in May 2010, he is once again a figure of great contention. In the final two months of 2013 he made the cover of the influential Matichon Weekly magazine on four occasions.
5. See, for instance, the discussion in Suthichai Yoon, “Why the amnesty bill has caused a split between Pheu Thai and the red shirts”, *The Nation* [online], 7 November 2013. It is relevant that former Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva and former Deputy Prime Minister Suthep Thaugsuban are among those who would directly benefit from the amnesty. Any effort to begin afresh with a “clean slate” is problematic for those who accuse these politicians of serious crimes including murder.


7. The Democrat Party boycotted the lower and upper house elections of April 2006 although there is no doubt that if they contested the poll the result would still have been a comprehensive victory for Thaksin’s Thai Rak Thai Party.


11. A cheeky critique of this situation is Charlie Campbell, “Thailand’s Democrat Party is hilariously misnamed”, *TIME* [online], 28 November 2013.


18. See “Thailand Senate rejects controversial amnesty bill”, *BBC News* [online], 12 November 2013. In the aftermath of this vote, some argued that the Members of Parliaments who passed the bill in the lower house deserved a reprimand: “Government ‘must apologise’ for amnesty bill”, *Bangkok Post* [online], 13 November 2013.

19. In December 2013 Bangkok-based photo-journalist offered a thorough account of one of the most significant incidents of violence: Nick Nostitz, “Ramkhamhaeng: A view from inside the stadium”, *New Mandala* [online], 10 December 2013. In an earlier incident Nick Nostitz was himself assaulted by anti-government protestors: for details see Nicholas Farrelly, “Assault on Nick Nostitz”, *New Mandala* [online], 29 November 2013.


21. For instance, see the discussion introduced by Pavin Chachavalpongpun, “Princess Chulabhorn’s politics”, *New Mandala* [online], 14 January 2013.

22. Such as Andrew Walker, “Why King Vajiralongkorn will be good for Thai democracy”, *New Mandala* [online], 23 April 2010.


24. Kate Hodal, “Thai monarchy laws need reviewing, say critics pointing to recent cases”, *The Guardian* [online], 3 October 2013.
25. Thaweeporn Kummetha, “Academics condemn Supreme Court’s ruling to have lèse majesté cover former kings”, *Prachatai* [online], 21 November 2013.
28. To provide context on why this is such a crucial aspect of Thailand’s political landscape it is worth considering: Craig J. Reynolds and team, “Time’s Arrow and the Burden of the Past: A Primer on the Thai Un-state”, Academia.edu [online], 7 September 2011.
29. “ICJ backs Cambodia’s claim to Preah Vihear temple promontory”, *Bangkok Post* [online], 11 November 2013.