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Introduction: Thai Realities and Possibilities after the 22 May Coup

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The *coup d'état* staged by Thailand's military under the leadership of army commander General Prayut Chanocha on 22 May 2014 inaugurated the country's longest period of naked dictatorship in half a century.

Even before the duration of this spell of authoritarian rule in Bangkok became clear, other factors had already distinguished the 22 May putsch and its aftermath. For one, the campaign of political repression and ideological transformation launched by the self-proclaimed National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO, *Khana raksa khwamsangop haeng chat*) junta that seized power in the coup represented a notable break with what had followed Thai coups of the recent past. Above all, that campaign made this coup very different from the coup of 19 September 2006, which had ousted Thaksin Shinawatra from the premiership, and it left many observers of Thai affairs concerned that the junta was determined to entrench long-term military domination of the country and its politics.

A second factor shaped observers' understandings of the NCPO, of its project and of the prospects for the success of that project from early on. Even at the time of the junta's seizure of power, it was evident that the

end of the long life and long reign of King Bhumibol Adulyadej was near. In the event, the king passed away, at the age of eighty-eight, on 13 October 2016, after seventy years as Thailand's sovereign. His son Vajiralongkorn succeeded him, fully four and a half decades after being designated crown prince (Handley 2006, p. 249).

In social, political, cultural, economic, institutional, demographic and other terms, the Thailand that the new king inherited was a different country from that of 1946, from that of the decades of counter-insurgency in which his father had redefined the role of the Thai monarchy, from that of the heyday of Bhumibol's reign in the 1980s and 1990s, and even from that which had first elected Thaksin to the premiership in January 2001. The events of the decade and half since that election had left the NCPO, a segment of the Thai military, more broadly and a number of civilian interests that backed the junta and its seizure of power determined to pursue a certain vision of Thailand's political and social orders. In pursuing that vision, the junta needed even from the earliest days of its dictatorship to attend to its relations with the then heir to the throne and to anticipate his own vision for the role of monarchy in the Thailand of the twenty-first century.

This book speaks above all to the plausibility of these visions. Its chapters concern conditions in Thailand in the period following the 22 May 2014 coup in Bangkok. They serve collectively to document and to analyse the realities and possibilities that obtained in the country in that period, along with the historical factors that accounted for those realities and possibilities.

The origins of the volume lie in the Thailand Forum conference held at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies — then soon to be rechristened the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute — in Singapore on 27 and 28 July 2015. That conference brought together fourteen scholars, all but one from Thailand, to present papers on panels addressing political developments and the monarchy, economic and social change, decentralization, regionalism, and culture and society. All but two of the chapters in this book originated as papers presented on those panels. While Viengrat Nethipo was unable to join the conference, she nevertheless graciously offered the chapter on decentralization published here for inclusion in the book. And while the conference organizers' oversight meant that the July 2015 gathering featured no presentation on the long-running crisis in Thailand's far-southern region of Patani, Rungrawee Chalermripinyorat subsequently agreed with great

kindness to prepare for us the chapter on that crisis that appears here. Similarly, neither Chanon Techasunthornwat nor Wimonsiri Hemtanon attended the Thailand Forum, but they joined conference participants Thorn Pitidol and Aim Sinpeng, respectively, in co-authoring chapters for this volume. Youngyut Burasit did the same in the case of the chapter co-authored with conference participant Kwanchit Sasiwongsaroj. We regret the absence from the book of chapters on decentralization and on the politics of contemporary Thai Buddhism by, respectively, Achakorn Wongpreedee and Katewadee Kulabkaew, each of whom joined us at ISEAS for the Thailand Forum conference.

Terence Chong, Mark Heng and I would like to thank former ISEAS Director Tan Chin Tiong for his unstinting support for the Institute's Thailand Studies Programme, Betty Tan for her impossible-to-match efficiency in organizing the Thailand Forum conference and Puangthong Pawakapan for her invaluable advice in helping us identify conference participants. The willingness of Jacob Ricks, Cassey Lee, Francis Hutchinson and Su-Ann Oh to moderate sessions of the Thailand Forum conference helped make it the success that it was. In the home stretch of work on this volume, the unfailing commitment to ISEAS's mission and unflagging backing of Ng Kok Kiong and Stephen Logan at ISEAS Publishing were what made it possible for it to appear.

Above all, we thank the contributors to this volume — for the privilege of publishing their work, for their unfailing cooperation and for their patience. That cooperation and that patience have meant that we made new friends and gained valued colleagues in our work on this book. We also had the chance to enjoy once more the intellectual companionship of some dear old friends. It is of particular satisfaction to me personally that this volume includes a chapter by Surachart Bamrungsuk, who demonstrated unforgettable kindness to me when I undertook dissertation research in provincial Thailand — and specifically in its remarkable Lower North — a quarter-century ago.

In a special note of thanks, Terence and I thank our third co-editor Mark for the skill and thoughtfulness with which he has steered this volume towards completion. We wish him well in all of his post-ISEAS undertakings.

Writing in early 2016, a savvy observer of contemporary Thailand labelled the military seizure of state power nearly two years earlier one “among a

select group of Thai coups which aim to shift the trajectory of the country's politics". That observer, Chris Baker, ranked its ambitiousness alongside that of the coups of 1932, 1976 and 1957 (Baker 2016, pp. 388–89).

The NCPO's effort to "set up an elaborate machinery to restructure the country's political system" (Baker 2016, p. 390), to introduce "lasting new political arrangements" (McCargo 2015c, p. 337), in the year or so following the coup made its ambitiousness clear. At the centre of this effort lay an ideologically sophisticated programme of depoliticization (Montesano 2015; McCargo 2015c, p. 346).

Thailand's military inherited from its experience of domestic counter-insurgency between the 1960s and the early 1980s a conception of its relationship to "the people" (*prachachon*) in a system of "democracy" that did not require politicians or parties (Montesano 2015, pp. 6ff.). In the late 1990s, the Thai Army made this conception explicit by tweaking the slogan of "Nation, Religion, King" (*chat satsana phramahakasat*) introduced early in the century by King Vajiravudh (r. 1910–25) and adopting "For Nation, Religion, King and People" (*phuea chat sat kasat lae prachachon*) as its own slogan (McCargo 2015b, p. 343). It was this latter slogan that appeared on Thai viewers' screens when they tuned into the weekly television broadcasts that NCPO leader General Prayut Chanocha made starting shortly after his coup (Montesano 2015, p. 1). In announcements concerning matters ranging from the suppression of the media to economic policies and the governance of state enterprises and even the state of Thai Buddhism, the announcements of the junta also repeatedly and consistently invoked "the people" (Montesano 2015, pp. 3–4).

These invocations, like the army slogan introduced in the late 1990s, bespoke a corporatist vision of politics, grounded in organic "mutuality" between the military and the undifferentiated mass that composed "the people" of Thailand (Montesano 2015, p. 10; McCargo 2015b, pp. 342, 344).¹ Through the programme of depoliticization that this vision implied, Duncan McCargo observed, "Thailand's political divides were expected to be wished/washed away by rebranding the entire population as 'the people', subordinated to the greater needs of the nation, religion and monarchy, and acting under military tutelage" (McCargo 2015b, p. 345).² And this expectation of tutelage in the aftermath of the May 2014 coup unmistakably suggested both frankly praetorian ambitions (Montesano 2015) and integralism masquerading as an interest in "reconciliation" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2014).

Less than a year into the NCPO junta's quasi-integralist experiment, McCargo already saw its ultimate failure as a foregone conclusion. "In the long term", he wrote, "depoliticizing the public sphere of such a vibrant country as Thailand surely lies beyond the realm of the possible" (McCargo 2015c, p. 352). This dismissal of the fundamental ambition of the most recent dictatorship to hold power in Bangkok as unrealistic represented a hopeful, even optimistic, assertion. Its emphasis on Thailand's vibrancy would certainly ring true to many outside observers of and stakeholders in the country. That vibrancy doubtless led many of those observers and stakeholders to engage with Thailand in the first place and to remain engaged with it over time.

McCargo's hopeful early prognostication that the NCPO junta's effort to make *solitudinem* pass for *pacem* was doomed glosses the present volume well. The contributions that follow document social and political dynamism and complexity whose susceptibility to long-term authoritarian effacement would appear far-fetched. These contributions do, that is, bespeak vibrancy, not least in Thai intellectual life. At the same time, to satisfy ourselves with viewing them as merely reflective of Thailand's continuing and undeniably appealing vibrancy would not be to do justice to the contributions' collective import. The term "vibrancy" remains essentially descriptive, rather than explanatory. While it sounds right, and seems to capture something essential, its invocation does not amount to an analysis — let alone a guide for observers and stakeholders concerned with the future of Thailand.

The chapters that follow build on McCargo's recognition of the lack of fit between Thailand's dynamism and complexity, on the one hand, and the NCPO's early designs for the country, on the other, to shed light on the forces that the junta's programme of depoliticization would shut down. They thus both lay bare the elements of Thailand's long-running crisis that the current spell of dispiriting dictatorship has failed to address and suggest some of the contours of the country's future.

Federico Ferrara has pointed out that influential understandings of those elements and those contours have focused on three sets of explanatory logic. One stresses the incompatibility of "Western" political forms and institutions with Thailand and its "culture, history, and tradition" (Ferrara 2015, p. 268) to account for the chronic political instability that has so often resulted in authoritarian rule. A second roots that instability in the alleged backwardness of Thailand's provincial electorate, relative to the "modern"

middle class of its primate city and capital (Ferrara 2015, p. 270). And the third stresses class conflict (Ferrara 2015, p. 273). Deftly refuting each of these logics in the crucial closing chapter of one of the most important English-language monographs on Thailand and its politics to appear in many decades,³ Ferrara proposes an alternative, more comprehensive, explanatory logic. That logic centres on “identity conflict”, on the contest over “the structure of the Thai nation and [their members’] place in it” among groups defined — and self-defined — with reference to such factors as “social status, regional origin, and political ideas” (Ferrara 2015, pp. 274–75).

Ferrara stresses that “modernization” — “the profound socio-economic transformations [that] the country has experienced since the 1960s” — has been a socially inclusive, indiscriminate, process (Ferrara 2015, p. 273). It has not made some elements of society “modern” while leaving others “backward”. It has reshaped “the aspirations and self-image of Thai citizens” of all backgrounds and origins, even while failing to level the “social hierarchy” that those distinctions structure (Ferrara 2015, p. 273).⁴ Ferrara’s argument thus places the country among those in which, far from playing a sociologically homogenizing role or from reducing differences in society to those defined by class, modernization has for all its pervasiveness increased the salience of multifaceted identities.⁵

The present volume serves to affirm Ferrara’s assertion of the need to understand Thailand’s twenty-first-century crisis as a conflict among bearers of a range of “collective identities” (Ferrara 2015, p. 252). That assertion has, in turn, a number of implications for our understanding of the chapters in the volume. One is that the country’s observed vibrancy is strongly related to the interaction of social, regional and ideological identities. Conflict has been the prevalent recent form of that interaction. Furthermore, efforts in the course of the past half-century to suppress the claims of certain identity groups in the name of “Thai-style democracy” have amounted to “structural violence”, and an emphasis on “Thainess” to delegitimize historically subaltern groups’ identities has amounted to “cultural violence” (Ferrara 2015, pp. 181, 182). Considered with reference to the specific context of the period after May 2014, Ferrara’s assertion concerning identity conflict also serves to expose the NCPO junta’s appeals to “the people” and its aspirations for integralist depoliticization of Thai society for what they are: attempts to deny, and to do still further violence to, the diversity of identities that has become so pronounced in the past two decades. But

the junta's recourse to repression has highlighted the weakness of those appeals and attempts and, perhaps, their futility (Ferrara 2015, p. 292).

The significance of conflict among collective social identities in explaining the early-twenty-first-century Thai crisis of which the NCPO dictatorship is only the latest phase makes Thorn Pitidol's and Chanon Techasunthornwat's chapter in this volume particularly valuable. The chapter draws on careful statistical analysis and on interviews with members of Thailand's Bangkok-centred upper middle class to offer nothing less than the history of one of the identities central to that conflict. This class emerged in the period of economic liberalization and rapid growth from the mid-1980s, years that also saw its fortunes diverge from those of the emerging lower middle class whose members have come since the turn of the century to pose the greatest challenge to the country's established social and political order. But material success alone did not define the new upper middle class. Rather, its identity has been centred on its members' strong sense of having earned their success, on their attachment to political order and on their associating the aspirations of the Thai lower middle class with allegedly corrupt conduct on the part of politicians. The perceived threat to its status embodied in those aspirations accounted for the upper middle class's support for the 2013–14 campaign of the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC)⁶ to drive the government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra from power and for its turn against democracy more generally.

Thorn and Chanon argue that factors including the presence of members of the new lower middle class in urban centres as well as in the countryside render obsolete understandings of political conflict in Thailand that stress the country's urban-rural divide. Anek Laothamatas's influential book chapter on "A Tale of Two Democracies", with its stress on the sophistication of the middle-class urban electorate and the venality and backwardness of rural voters (Anek 1996), has informed those time-worn understandings. Instead of the centrality to Thailand's political troubles of those two geographically distinct electorates, Thorn and Chanon stress that of the contest between "contemporary Thailand's two middle classes".⁷ The vision of political order on the part of the upper middle class that they delineate makes unmistakable the degree to which that contest represents an identity conflict.

Other contributors to this volume reinforce Thorn's and Chanon's message. Anusorn Unno's chapter treats an identity group whose members

also supported the PDRC in the push to oust Yingluck that led to the May 2014 coup. In its analysis of the political views and activities of people from the Upper South of Thailand resident in Bangkok, it affirms Thorn's and Chanon's observation concerning the inadequacy of understanding Thai politics through the lens of a simple urban-rural divide. At the same time, however, it joins Ferrara in affirming the importance of regional attachments as a factor in defining collective identities in contemporary Thailand. Anusorn offers a reassessment of scholarship that has held that Upper Southern Thais are "anti-state" in their political orientation.⁸ Examining the historical relationship of the Upper South with the Siamese and later the Thai monarchy, he casts the participation in the PDRC's protests of people with roots in that part of the country as an example of the "regionalization" of nationalism and of support for the dominant state ideology. His chapter, like Thorn's and Chanon's, thus points both to the evolution of a particular political identity and, more generally, to the dynamism of collective identities in Thailand — the latter a reality certain to figure in the country's future.

Far more than that of the Upper South, the regional identity of Thailand's Northeast, or Isan, has been the subject of considerable scholarly attention.⁹ Saowanee's and McCargo's chapter notes the region's historical recalcitrance towards and dispiriting subordination in the Bangkok-centric political order, its "distinctly Lao identity" and the broad support among its inhabitants for Thaksin Shinawatra and the Red side of Thailand's political divide.¹⁰ This history served as background to the revulsion and even, repression notwithstanding, the occasional defiance among people in the region that followed the May 2014 putsch. The authors' fieldwork makes clear that the quiescence that the NCPO junta appeared to bring to the Northeast both resulted from its creepy intimidation tactics and came, ultimately, from the barrels of its guns. But they also offer a more fundamental observation about Isan identity and Thailand's long-term political crisis. Calling attention to the origins outside the Northeast of all of the leading Red Shirt figures of the past decade, they argue that persistent relegation of the region and its people to inferior status in the Thai social and political orders has resulted in an identity that, while strong, nevertheless lacks confidence and ambition. Their tentative diagnosis of "heroic failure" provokes pathos.

Also a bastion of considerable support for native son Thaksin and the Red side of the country's great political schism, Northern Thailand, or

Lanna, is another region of the country with a pronounced historical and sociocultural identity.¹¹ The clear position of the majority of the North's electorate in the political conflict of this century notwithstanding, the region and its identity have far more often been the objects of admiration than of the scorn suffered by the Northeast. Like Saowanee's and McCargo's chapter on the Northeast, Tanet Charoenmuang's chapter on the North in the year after the coup also addresses apparent quiescence during that period. "Why was there so little resistance to the coup?", he asks. "Why were there so few Red Shirt protests", contrary to expectations shaped by the levels of organization and activity previously evident in Northern Thailand?

Tanet's exceedingly well-informed answers to these questions open up a novel perspective on the course of Thailand's identity conflict. His chapter argues that, to be sure, a robust Red Shirt identity with a strong regionalist or Lanna element emerged out of the turmoil that affected Thailand from 2005 onwards. However, despite considerable activity in support of the Yingluck government during the period of PDRC protests against it, at neither the national nor regional nor local level did Northern Red Shirts develop the bases for effective resistance to the dictatorship that NCPO rule brought to Thailand. The ability to hold demonstrations in Bangkok was one thing, but Tanet's fieldwork in the North revealed a Red Shirt failure in the period before the coup "to strengthen local democracy or to address the country's backward structural arrangements". This failure both explains the lack of effective or widespread resistance to the NCPO junta and highlights the means that parties to Thailand's identity conflict must be prepared to adopt in order to fight their corner.

Elements in the Malay-Muslim population of Patani, in the Lower South of Thailand, have repeatedly taken up arms to fight their own corner, in what is arguably the most dramatic and tragic manifestation of identity conflict that the country has witnessed in modern times.¹² McCargo has referred to the renewed violence that has scarred the region since the first years of the present century and to the fumbling search for a solution — whether military or political — to armed conflict there as a "play within a play" (McCargo 2012a, p. 4). The geographical setting of the Patani conflict is on the far periphery of the country, in provinces along the Thai-Malaysian border that only a tiny proportion of the inhabitants of Bangkok have ever visited or will ever visit. But that conflict has, McCargo notes, long centred on the very same questions that the political

struggles at the national level have made pressing in the past decade and a half. “[W]hat is the basis of the country’s legitimacy?” How does that legitimacy relate to the interplay of the national identity — of putatively shared and homogenous “Thainess” — on the one hand and the range of in fact “disparate identities” so evident in the country on the other (McCargo 2012a, p. 5)?

In tracing efforts to pursue a formal peace dialogue on Patani with the facilitation of Malaysia from the time of the Yingluck government, Rungrawee Chalermripinyorat’s chapter in this volume addresses the conflict in Thailand’s Deep South in a fresh and fruitful way. Perhaps surprisingly, the NCPO dictatorship opted to continue attempts at dialogue initiated by the government that its coup had toppled in May 2014. But Rungrawee’s account of those attempts and of the difficulties with which they met underlines the extent to which disparate identities could remain a source of conflict rather than a welcome mark of vibrancy or a prod to adaptation. While the perpetrators of violence against the Thai state in the region did not make for easy negotiating partners, the NCPO revealed nervousness and defensiveness bordering on desperation in its reluctance even to call those partners by a proper name. Similarly, its skittishness about potentially constructive foreign involvement in a matter touching on national identity and claims to unity, along with its fear that meaningful devolution of administrative authority might pose a challenge to that presumed unity, suggested the fragility of its outlook and perhaps of the order in which that outlook was grounded.

Identities may serve as vessels for interests, and the media as channels for the expression of interests by means short of conflict. In the wake of the seizure of state power on the part of a faction of the Thai military in 1991 and its violent but futile attempt to perpetuate its hold on power after elections the following year, Thailand embarked on a programme of media reform and liberalization. That programme held out the promise of a plural, more open, media sector — one conducive to the constructive expression of diverse interests in society. Aim Sinpeng and Wimonsiri Hemtanon explain the frustration of the reforms of the 1990s, due not least to the economic pressures on the sector in which the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 resulted. The *coups d’état* of 2006 and 2014 only intensified the political pressure to which Thaksin Shinawatra had submitted the Thai media during his 2001–6 premiership. They ushered in what Aim and

Wimonsiri characterize as a return of military influence over the media. The same period saw another development on which these scholars place particular emphasis, the deepening partisanship of the media. Their chapter argues that that partisanship extended to the country's burgeoning social media sector. That sector became a significant arena for political conflict, albeit an arena in which the 2007 Computer-Related Crime Act and enforcement of the law on *lèse majesté* served to repress free expression. For both the traditional media and social media, the NCPO dictatorship proved particularly repressive.

The account of thwarted reform, renewed repression and stark partisanship of the Thai media that Aim and Wimonsiri offer exemplifies the vicious cycle in which Thailand has found itself since just after the turn of the century. The impulse to repress the media underlines, again, post-coup governments' recognition of the fragility of the long-established socio-political order in the country. At the same time, the partisanship that has come to define Thailand's media landscape makes clear the depth of the divides in which identity conflicts have resulted. Those divides mean that, rather than embodying the dynamic features of a plural order, Thai media have become, in Aim's and Wimonsiri's telling, weaponized.

In treating another example of frustrated reform and missed opportunity to prevent difference from giving rise to conflict, Viengrat Nethipo tells a strikingly similar story. The measures taken in the area of administrative decentralization to the provincial, municipal and sub-district (*tambon*) levels following the promulgation of Thailand's 1997 constitution introduced a fundamental modification of the bureaucratic, colonial-model regime of territorial control that had long defined Thai life.¹³ Inevitably, then, it triggered a campaign of counter-decentralization, one that seemed to culminate in the policies adopted by the NCPO dictatorship.¹⁴

But the account of Thailand's decentralization in Viengrat's chapter includes another crucial element. In the face of the manifestly differing interests of provincial Thais and many Bangkokians, and in the context of historical patterns of clientelism in the politics of the Thai provinces, decentralization had a potential akin to that of media reform. In taking decision-making and resources out of the hands of officials dispatched from the capital and giving local power brokers an opening to enter formal politics at the sub-district or provincial level, it embodied a chance to reduce the grievances of the residents of the provinces and to head off

conflict over resources. In the event, as Viengrat argues, the effect was rather different. Impelling provincial people to take an active interest in politics, decentralization complemented the policies of Prime Minister Thaksin in making those people feel like citizens rather than subjects. It thus pitched them into the national political conflict rooted over Thai identity and the place in the Thai order of people with disparate identities.

Both Aim's and Wimonsiri's analysis of partisanship in the Thai media and Viengrat's explanation of administrative reform's role in the creation of partisan citizens confirm that the impetus for the conflicts into which this century has plunged Thailand long predate the period since 2001. They point to cleavages long fudged, papered over or suppressed.

In contrast to those contributors, Surachart Bamrungsuk treats the absence of reform, but his chapter also points to the duration of identity conflict. Thailand's leading scholar of what would in other contexts be called civil-military relations, Surachart contextualizes the aftermath of the May 2014 coup both in a saga of the country's interminable failure to introduce military reform and in a contemporary period of dramatic social transformation. The challenge of what his chapter calls "the changing relationship among elites, the middle class and the masses" that defines this period accounts for the Thai Army's defensive recourse to an integralist, depoliticizing vision. It also makes all the more anachronistic the persistent lack of military professionalism and of subordination of the armed forces to civilian control in Thailand. This persistence undergirds more than just the politicization of the Thai military and the repeated political interventions on its part that Surachart chronicles. It also explains the army's status as one more among the identity groups in conflict in Thailand, and thus exposes the cynical and self-serving nature of the NCPO dictatorship's early, failed programme of depoliticization.

Since the late 1950s, it has been impossible to assess the political role of the Thai military, or its pursuit of its interests, without reference to its partnership with the Thai monarchy. In the four decades following King Bhumibol's intervention in the events of October 1973, the palace served as the senior partner in what was the most important relationship in Thai politics. But Paul Chambers and Napisa Waitoolkiat have argued that, by 2006 and the years thereafter, "the balance in the relationship" showed signs of change and that, in the aftermath of the 2014 coup, that change was unmistakable (Chambers and Napisa 2016, pp. 434, 438, 439).

We must understand this change against the backdrop of two factors. One is the long final illness of the late king, along with the advanced age of the palace's indispensable agent Privy Council Chairman Prem Tinsulanon (Chambers and Napisa 2016, pp. 436, 438).¹⁵ The other is the surfacing of identity conflict in Thai society from the early years of the present century. While it predated these developments, the army's introduction of a slogan in the late 1990s that stressed its own direct commitment to "the people" aligned well with its transition from a previously subordinate position in its partnership with the palace.¹⁶ Whether King Vajiralongkorn's consolidation of his grip on the monarchy, and perhaps on the Thai military and state, would bring yet another transition in the relationship has remained an important question.¹⁷

Thongchai Winichakul's chapter in this volume allows us to appreciate the stakes in changes in the decades-old partnership of monarchy and military. He begins the chapter by noting the astonishing persistence of conventional understandings of Thai politics grounded in the naïve idea "that democratization is the struggle against the military to entrench the supremacy of elections and civilian rule". He holds that this understanding misapprehends the long-term reality in the country of "a form of guided democracy" in which the functioning of the monarchy as a politically active "power bloc" has vitiated the substance of electoral rule. Terming this regime type "royal democracy", Thongchai argues that it rests on the transmogrification of a programme of ideological hegemony that Thai monarchists began to craft in the late 1940s as a means of counter-revolution against the toppling of the absolute monarchy on 24 June 1932. The result of that transmogrification was, from the 1970s onward, a pervasive "public culture" of "hyper-royalism" (Thongchai 2016). Along with the media and the law on *lèse majesté*, the military, the bureaucracy, the judiciary, the Privy Council, the Crown Property Bureau and — Thongchai pointedly notes — important elements of civil society and non-governmental organizations have served as the buttresses of royal democracy in Thailand.

Even had that political form not depended on the ambiguous fusion of monarch, in the person of King Bhumibol, and monarchy, what Thongchai calls "a changing society and changing political demography" would have thrown royal democracy into the "predicament" that it faced by the last years of the late sovereign's life. The earliest phase of King Vajiralongkorn's reign has, ironically, confronted that political order with a challenge of a very different sort, in the form of starker, more open assertions of royal power

than were the norm in his father's time. The NCPO junta has complied with those assertions of power, whose effect may, Thongchai writes, be "to drop the cloak of democracy and to show the face of a semi-monarchical kingdom more openly".

Thongchai questions the viability of such a regime. The years ahead may put his scepticism to the test, for the start of the new reign has already begun to give the Thai monarchy a very different identity. Events such as the new king's 28 July birthday may continue to see recourse to forms of official and quasi-official public celebration that his father's long reign made familiar. Nevertheless, abrupt change in the institutional identity of the monarchy has, for many observers — even in royalist circles — proved arresting in its unfamiliarity. It does not simply exceed the change in which both very different times and the personal differences between, say, a sovereign who did not leave his kingdom for the last half-century of his life and reign (Crossette 1989) and one who appears to live mainly in Bavaria would necessarily result. In many respects it suggests a determination to repudiate 24 June 1932 and to restore royal absolutism in the management of at least some domains of Thai affairs.¹⁸ These suggestions run in the opposite direction to the evolution in institutional identity that not only changing times but also the examples of the European monarchies that successive Chakri monarchs have sought, at least superficially, to emulate would lead one to expect. Or was that expectation naïve all along?

It is not in any case clear that royal agency or the state of the partnership between palace and military deserve the greatest weight among factors shaping our ideas about the place of monarchy in the Thailand of the future. Well before Vajiralongkorn's reign began, the identity conflicts that had come to the surface in Thailand had already undermined the carefully constructed royal hegemony of the decades since Bhumibol acceded to the throne after the tragic death of his brother Ananda Mahidol in 1946. "Anonymous" has argued that, particularly after the military seizure of power in Bangkok in September 2006, it was the longstanding hegemony of Thai royalism itself that engendered on the Red side of the country's identity divide a sense of betrayal of the expectations of relations between the monarchy and its subjects. Resultant expressions of anti-royalism thus drew with bitter sarcasm on motifs historically employed and invoked to celebrate King Bhumibol (Anonymous 2018).

While not so intense in either substance or expression, a comparable effect was evident in foreign press coverage of the Thai monarchy during

the same period. That press had long subscribed to an understanding of the monarchy and its putatively benevolent, modernizing role that essentially reflected royal hegemony in the country. It projected that understanding internationally and thus helped to propagate a version of Thai national identity very much to the liking of elites in Bangkok. In fact, awareness of foreign admiration for King Bhumibol and the Thai monarchy powerfully reinforced confidence at home in that hegemony and in the social and political order that it structured.

In 1988, the active and distinguished Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand confirmed the prominence, and the largely positive treatment, of Bhumibol and his activities in the international press with the release of a collection of articles that had appeared across the decades (Gray, Everingham and Wrigley 1988). That volume, *The King of Thailand in World Focus*, appeared in the year of grand celebrations to mark Bhumibol's becoming the longest reigning monarch in Thai history. As Puangthong Pawakapan notes in her contribution to this book, two decades later, the year after even grander celebrations of Bhumibol's completion of six decades on the throne, the club released a second, updated edition of the book (Gray and Faulder 2007). But times had changed. Foreign journalists in Bangkok were now in direct contact with Thais of a wider range of identities and backgrounds, in a more complex society, than in the past. They had read former *Far Eastern Economic Review* Bangkok correspondent Paul Handley's "landmark" 2006 biography of Bhumibol (Handley 2006). Professional responsibility alone meant that their coverage captured the partisan role of the monarchy and of royalist elites in the political conflict that had overtaken the country in the new century. The result was a rather decisive change in treatment of Thailand's most important institution and of its leading figure in the foreign press — a change that, Puangthong suggests, had a substantial impact on understandings of Thailand in foreign capitals.

In a short recent essay "On the Thai Monarchy" published in the prestigious, traditionalist *Journal of the Siam Society*, William Klausner reminds us that the long reign of the late king saw monarch and monarchy come to shape Thai identity on many levels at the same time. He argues that, even posthumously, Bhumibol "remains an integral part of each individual Thai identity and of the national identity" (Klausner 2018, p. 317).¹⁹ To resort to clumsy phrasing, a comparable effect long served in the definition of

Thailand's "international identity", too. By October 2016, however, that latter effect had long since faded, as Puangthong makes clear.²⁰ Both for Thais and for the swelling numbers of non-Thais who claim an interest or stake in the country, the emergence of "Bangkok as a globalized city" (Baker 2016, p. 402) and the parallel globalization of "Thainess" and of contests over its meaning are destined to have the strongest effect in defining the country's international identity in the future.

Klausner's essay omits all mention of King Vajiralongkorn, or Rama X. Instead, its final sentence looks ahead by referring to the late King Bhumibol and by averring, "It may be expected that more than a few Thais will develop future strategies to assure that they will continue to remain under King Rama IX's protection and beneficence" (Klausner 2018, p. 317). As we look ahead to both the short- and long-term future of Thailand in this volume, some of the tests that such future strategies will face are clear.

At the time of writing, political actors in Thailand were increasingly focused on the prospect of long-delayed parliamentary elections in the first half of 2019. Oddly enough, this included even actors who rated the odds that palace, army or some combination of the two would in fact not allow voters to go to the polls at greater than even.

The emerging picture was not one of successful depoliticization, plausible integralism or even remotely viable praetorian tutelage. Instead, a 2017 constitution designed to produce a lower house of parliament with members drawn from numerous medium-sized parties (Prajak 2018, p. 365) looked likely to result in the sort of messy electoral contests that characterized Thailand during most of the final two decades of the twentieth century. Charges of official pressure on former members of parliament to sign on with a party that would serve, either officially or on a de facto basis, as an electoral vehicle supporting General Prayut's retention of the premiership were just one reminder that messiness could easily fade into grubbiness rather than embody vibrancy (*Bangkok Post*, 31 July 2018).

Prajak Kongkirati has traced the performance and fates of "military parties" in Thailand since they first emerged in the 1950s. He notes the historical correlation between those parties' presence on the electoral landscape and "unfree and unfair" polls (Prajak 2018, p. 374). The constraints that the NCPO placed on the August 2016 referendum on the current constitution (Chookiat 2017, p. 357) suggested that this correlation was worth bearing in mind in the run-up to elections in 2019. Prajak also notes the political

clumsiness and poor party discipline that have characterized military parties in the past, along with Thai soldiers' record of electoral "misconduct and manipulation" and the popular dissent that these have provoked (Prajak 2018, p. 374). Historical precedent thus suggested that efforts to secure the premiership for General Prayut or perhaps for another member of the NCPO junta following coming elections were a recipe for instability rather than quiescence.

The situation was striking. The junta had enjoyed a long period of total political control. It had armed itself with a constitution that would give an upper house of its own choosing a role in selecting the next prime minister (Prajak 2018, p. 364). It could impose severe and arbitrary constraints on parties and campaigning. Nevertheless, it found itself nervously confronting the unpredictability of electoral politics. This outcome made both the depoliticizing pretensions of its early days in power and its determination to impose a legally binding Twenty-Year National Strategy on the country (Pongphisoot 2018, p. 347) appear slightly absurd.

But impressions of absurdity were misleading. The political climate in mid-2018 Thailand remained sinister. The dictatorship had not stepped back from repression and petty intimidation. This conduct was almost certain to continue, and perhaps to grow in intensity, as campaigning began and polls drew nearer. Also sinister was the authorities' persistent lack of interest in getting to the bottom of the mysterious disappearance in April 2017 of a plaque commemorating the replacement of the absolute monarchy with a constitutional order in 1932. At the time of its disappearance, that plaque had been embedded in the Royal Plaza (*lan phrarup*) in Bangkok's Dusit district for eight decades (Murdoch 2017). Its theft underlined that among the many dimensions of Thailand's identity conflict numbered the divide between those who viewed elections as a basis for political legitimacy and popular sovereignty and those who viewed them as a merely formal and perhaps troublesome exercise in political legitimation.

In his chapter in the present volume, Prajak makes clear the threat that Thailand's identity conflict poses to the legacy of 1932 and the vision of popular sovereignty with which many in the country, of all walks of life, have increasingly come to invest that legacy in very explicit ways. The chapter examines the relationship between violence and electoral politics since the 1970s. It argues that, while "the royal-military alliance" used state violence against those who challenged its ideological hegemony in the middle years of that decade, the following thirty years saw the

“privatization” of violence as tool for use among competitors for election to parliament. The change in patterns of political violence in Thailand was a significant one.

But not, perhaps, a lasting one. Like “Anonymous”, Puangthong and others, Prajak sees 2006 as a watershed year in the story of Thailand’s troubles. Thereafter, his chapter observes, ideological factors again accounted for patterns of political violence in Thailand. The Thai military used substantial force to suppress Red Shirt protests in April and May of 2010. Clashes and confrontations on streets of Bangkok, involving elements on both the Red and Yellow sides of the country’s political divide, occurred in the second half of 2008, in April 2009 and in late 2013 and the first half of 2014. Supplanting narrow political rivalries as a source of violence, Thailand’s broad identity conflict became an often bloody struggle in the past dozen years. Dwelling on the violence that characterized the PDRC’s disruption of the national elections of February 2014, Prajak terms the group’s and its supporters’ “animosity towards the elections ... an unprecedented development”, one that “broke apart the peaceful and democratic means by which the public could decide who had the right to govern”. With the coup that soon followed, this development leads him to express a fear of political violence in Thailand, “possibly for years to come”.

Prajak’s worries call attention, again, to the failure of NCPO efforts to impose a sustainable state of solitude or quiescence on the country. Further, if the right of the governed to select those who will govern does indeed become an issue of long-term future concern, it will join other issues of importance whose resolution will determine the future of Thailand.

This volume does not include, unfortunately, a chapter on Thailand’s relationship with the People’s Republic of China. But Porphant Ouyyanont’s contribution to the volume and that of Kwanchit Sasiwongsaroj and Youngyut Burasit examine a pair of issues that, like that relationship, will shape the future of Thailand by shaping the individual and collective identities of Thais and in fact the national identity itself.

The sustained “boom” that Thailand knew in the years after 1985 resulted in “a different country” — in “the politics, the social changes, and the popular culture” (Pasuk and Baker 1998, p. 1). Even more than the 1997 “bust” that brought the period to an end and prepared the ground for the ensuing rise of Thaksin Shinawatra, the boom years represent the essential background to the identity conflict that has grown so sharp and so evident in the present century. They remain central to the way that many

in Thailand see themselves and their compatriots and expect themselves and their country to be seen by the rest of the world.

Porphant's chapter addresses Thailand's transition to slower economic growth after 1997. The country has historically relied on low-cost labour. Scholars, observers and stakeholders have for decades recognized its failures in the area of human capital development.²¹ The role of these realities in making Thailand "one of the most unequal societies in Asia" (Pasuk and Baker 2016, p. 1), not least in the context of the transformation of a largely agricultural economy to one focussed on manufacturing and especially services, are unsurprising. But inequality has also set the stage for conflict. Both, on one side, "pattern[s] of privilege" — to recall Thorn's and Chanon's chapter in this volume — and, on the other, the belief that one lacks access to "good education, a fair trial, and a decent chance in life" (Pasuk and Baker 2016, p. 1) have proved constitutive of identities in Thailand. Complementing Saowanee's and McCargo's chapter and also Tanet's, Porphant calls attention to the regional dimension of inequality in the country. To use a term now very much in vogue on American university campuses, identity divides in Thailand exemplify "intersectionality"; that is, indeed, the point of Ferrara's emphasis on identity conflict.

Porphant notes an additional factor in the pattern of slow growth that has come to define the Thai economy. While he does not refer explicitly to fears that Thailand has fallen into the "middle-income trap", with all the implications for stagnation and frustrated expectations that that fate might bring, he shares with many students of the contemporary Thai economy²² a concern with a lack of the technological innovation necessary to improve its competitiveness.

This concern and those relating to the labour force notwithstanding, Porphant is relatively sanguine about Thailand's adjustment to a period of slower growth. Tourism and other service sectors continue to hold much promise. "Structural change in Thai agriculture", a transition to higher value-added in the sector and diversification of the rural economy more generally give him confidence in the future. So, too, does the promise of increased cross-border trade associated with ASEAN Economic Community. By definition, peripheral parts of Thailand are destined to play a leading role in that trade. And scholars have for some years called attention to the emergence of the "cosmopolitan villagers", "middle-class peasants" and "urbanized villagers" of Thailand's new lower middle class in which the diversification to which Porphant refers has resulted (Keyes 2014; Walker

2012; Naruemon and McCargo 2011). Even in an era of slower growth in the national economy, the dynamism of provincial Thai economies has important implications for socio-economic change and the evolution of identities.

Porphant's sanguine outlook extends even to Thailand's low rates of human fertility, which, he avers, will drive wages up, impel greater use of capital in the farm sector and lead to increased per capita investment in the education of children. Kwanchit Sasiwongsaroj's and Youngyut Burasit's chapter paints a less rosy picture of demographic trends in Thailand. In clear and sobering detail, its authors chart the range of challenges with which rapid ageing will present the country. Most importantly, they call attention to the interaction of the rapid growth of the proportion of Thais aged more than sixty-five years and a number of other developments.

These developments include the range of healthcare and welfare policies, some targeting the elderly, introduced by various Thai governments in the past quarter-century.

Those policies and the demand that they meet put Thaksinite "populism" and the inability of subsequent anti-Thaksinite governments to reverse the associated policies into valuable perspective. Of course, the costs of such policies, and thus the impact of rapid ageing on the Thai economy, will only mount. Other relevant developments include, inevitably, disparities in services available to elderly people in rural and urban Thailand and changing values and family structures in Thai society.

In the simplest terms, Thailand will, like today's Japan, be a very different — and perhaps less vibrant — place when fewer and fewer of its people are young, and as the fiscal burden of caring for greater and greater numbers of elderly people mounts. This difference will affect Thais' understanding of their society and their sense of the possible. In addition to its broad impact on individual, collective and national identities, it will also — as Kwanchit's and Youngyut's vivid chapter makes clear — shape the stakes in conflicts and compromises in the Thai political order.

In the concluding chapter of this volume, Terence Chong makes the invaluable point that Thailand has not reached an "end of history". Neither the sinister putsch announced to members of Thailand's political class at the Army Club on 22 May 2014, the death of King Bhumibol at Siriraj Hospital on the Thonburi bank of the Chao Phraya River on 13 October two years later, the coming official coronation rites for King Vajiralongkorn nor the elections anticipated for some time in 2019 will have been able to

reconcile the forces that have stirred Thailand during this century. More importantly, none of these events could “freeze” or stabilize those forces. Like the identities with which they are interwoven, and like “Thai” identity itself, they will remain in flux.

Serhat Ünalđi, author of the striking *Working towards the Monarchy: The Politics of Space in Downtown Bangkok* (Ünalđi 2016b), considers “inevitable ... the emergence of a political system that gives expression to the demands and aspirations of the Thai people rather than those of the select few” (Ünalđi 2016a, p. 318). Federico Ferrara himself largely shares this Whig view of contemporary Thai history, rooted in “ongoing socio-economic change”, the waning effectiveness of state repression and “the rise of ... [an] alternative, ‘counterhegemonic’ vision of the nation’s structure and future” to which “a solid plurality of the electorate” subscribes (Ferrara 2015, p. 276). His faith in modernization strong, Ferrara emphasizes the lack of fit between “the country’s diversity and ongoing social change” (Ferrara 2015, p. 270).

After the Coup parts ways with these scholars, but not because its contributors or we editors necessarily take issue with their scholarship, their hopes or even their conclusions. Rather, it is because the volume is not an exercise in soothsaying. Terence Chong, Mark Heng and I have sought here simply to offer readers concerned with the future of Thailand an understanding of the realities and possibilities that will shape that future. Not least, that future will emerge from the unfolding of conflicts over identity. We present the chapters that follow, prepared by a distinguished group of Thai intellectuals, with confidence that they offer perspectives on those conflicts that will prove stimulating, enlightening and useful.

Notes

1. This implicit “Army-people mutuality” (Montesano 2015, p. 10) appeared in the period after the 2014 coup to represent a challenge to the established, similarly integralist, Thai concept of *ratchaprachasamasai* or “king-people mutuality” whose importance the work of Michael Connors has so fruitfully recognized; see, for example, Connors (2008). This newer variant of mutuality thus epitomized what appeared to be the aspirational praetorianism of the NCPO junta at that time.
2. It is important to note that these corporatist and depoliticizing urges, with their integralist and even *völkisch* conception of “the people”, were by no means confined to the Thai military. Suthep Thaugsuban invoked a strikingly

- similar vision, centred on “the great mass of the people” (*muanmahaprachachon*), in leading the demonstrations against the government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra that culminated in the NCPO putsch. See, for example, *The Sunday Nation* (2014) and Nidhi (2013b).
3. See Montesano (2016).
 4. Also see Ferrara (2015, pp. 263ff.).
 5. See Sandhu (1986, p. iii).
 6. That is, *Khanakammakan prachachon phuea kanplianplaeng prathet thai hai pen prachathippatai thi sombun an mi phramahakasat songpen pramuk* (literally, “the people’s committee for the transformation of Thailand into a total democracy with the king as head of state”).
 7. On the contemporary Thai lower middle class, also see Naruemon and McCargo (2011).
 8. See Askew (2008, pp. 52ff.).
 9. Keyes (1967) pioneered this study; he surveys long-term developments in Isan in Keyes (2014). Kamala (1997), Dararat (2003), Pattana (2012) and Platt (2013) are also particularly enlightening.
 10. This Isan identity is one that has long since ceased to be strictly rural or even provincial; witness its centrality to the make-up of working- and lower-middle-class Bangkok. Naruemon and McCargo (2011, pp. 7, 15–16) call attention to the increasing blurriness of the urban-rural divide, as it applies not only to the population of the Thai capital but also to major provincial centres.
 11. See, for example, Easum (2013, esp. pp. 213ff.).
 12. See Surin (1985) and McCargo (2008).
 13. On the origins of this regime, see Tej (1977).
 14. In fact, Viengrat paints a more complicated picture, in which the junta’s National Reform Council (*sapha patirup haeng chat*) actually harboured a pro-centralization faction. This wrinkle highlights the extremely ambiguous nature of the reformism behind the 1997 constitution; see McCargo (1998).
 15. On General Prem’s long-term role as the central node in Thailand’s “network monarchy”, see McCargo (2005).
 16. Also see Chambers and Napisa (2016, p. 441n4).
 17. See McCargo (2018).
 18. For a discussion of this development as it relates to Buddhism, see Khemthong (2018), and, on control of the Crown Property Bureau, see Reuters (2017) and Associated Press (2018).
 19. In a recent article on the Thai television drama *Bupphesanniwat*, Patrick Jory addresses the possibility that members of Thailand’s urban upper middle and middle classes may be coming implicitly to distinguish their continued loyalty to the monarchy as an institution or as an idea from their loyalty to “their kings” as individuals. At the same time, he suggests, they may be refocusing

- their “moral yearnings ... away from the monarchy [and] towards a more religiously-inclined nationalism” (Jory 2018, pp. 453–54).
20. In another striking illustration of this revised understanding, and of the fact that the prominence of its monarchy had come to reflect negatively rather than positively on Thailand’s national identity, a recent overview of Indonesian politics since the fall of Soeharto’s New Order refers casually and in an utterly matter-of-fact way to “the kingdom’s infamous *lèse majesté* laws” (Davidson 2018, p. 3).
 21. See Sirilaksana (1993).
 22. See, for example, Patarapong (2018).