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# Infiltrating Society

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# Infiltrating Society

*The Thai Military's  
Internal Security Affairs*

PUANGTHONG PAWAKAPAN

**ISEAS** YUSOF ISHAK  
INSTITUTE

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# Thai Language Convention

For most Thai words, this book adheres to the phonetic transcription of the “General System of Phonetic Transcription of Thai Characters into Roman” devised by the Royal Institute, Bangkok, in 1954. In the case of a name which is widely known or which can be checked, the owner’s transcription is used. The English names of certain Thai royals, such as Chulalongkorn, Bhumibol, and Vajiralongkorn, have been adopted rather than the lengthy official titles. Thai people are referred to by their first names while Westerners are referred to by their surnames. In the text and bibliography, Thai names are entered according to first names.

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# Abbreviations

## Mass Organizations

CDV	Civil Defence Volunteers ( <i>Asa samak pongkanphai fai phonlaruen</i> )
RNS	Reservists for National Security
TNDV	Thai National Defence Volunteers ( <i>Thai a-sa pongkanchat or Tho.so.po.cho.</i> )
VDC	Volunteer Defence Corps ( <i>A-sa raksa dindaen or O.So.</i> )
VDSO	Volunteers for Development and Self-Defence ( <i>A-sa phatthana lae pongkan ton-eng or O.pho.po.</i> )
VDSV	Village for Development and Self-Defence Volunteers programme ( <i>Muban a-sa phatthana lae pongkan ton-eng</i> )
VSU	Village Security Unit (Chutraksa khwamplodphai muban or Cho.ro.bo.)
VPH	Volunteers for Public Health
VHV	<i>Village Health Volunteers (Asasamak satharanasuk pracham muban or O.so.mo)</i>

## Others

ARD	Accelerated Rural Development
BPP	Border Patrol Police
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CDD	Community Development Department
CPM	Civilian-police-military joint command
CPT	Communist Party of Thailand
CSC	Central Security Command
DDPM	Department of Disaster Prevention and Mitigation
DOPA	Department of Provincial Administration
DOLA	Department of Local Administration
LAD	Local Administration Department
MOI	Ministry of Interior
MOPH	Ministry of Public Health
NCPO	National Council for Peace and Order
NESDB	National Economic and Social Development Board
NPKC	National Peace Keeping Council
NRC	National Reform Council
NSCT	National Student Centre of Thailand
PWD	Public Welfare Department
RFD	Royal Forest Department

# Foreword

*Michael J. Montesano*

*Infiltrating Society* opens up new and valuable perspectives on three concerns central to serious understanding of modern Thailand. The first of these concerns is the means by which the military in fact involves itself in the country's politics and governance. The second concern is the specific challenge posed to Thai democracy by the military's employment of those poorly understood means. The last concern is Bangkok's relationship with the Thai provinces—and by extension the country's and society's historically fraught quest for and contest over what, with apologies to modernization theorists of yore, it is appropriate to call national integration.

\* \* \*

The closing years of the reign of King Bhumibol Adulyadej and the opening years of that of his successor King Vajiralongkorn have aroused renewed interest in relations between Thailand's military and its monarchy. Attention has focused above all on the inactivity to which King Bhumibol's infirmity condemned him during the last years of his life and its consequences for the partnership of palace and Army, on the loyalty to the royal institution of the high command of that latter force, on the apparent strength or weakness of various senior officers' ties to King Vajiralongkorn, and on the new king's decision to assume direct control of certain units of the country's military.

Puangthong Pawakapan denies the importance of none of these foci. But she argues in *Infiltrating Society* that an effort to understand the bonds between military and monarchy demands that we look well beyond coup plots hatched among senior officers in Bangkok and those same officers' extravagant poses of loyalty to a notionally timeless and essential Thai monarchy. For the bonds between soldier and sovereign in recent history have in fact owed much to the era of counterinsurgent operations—focused on the perceived security threat of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) and undertaken above all in rural and even remote reaches of the Thai provinces—from the 1960s into the 1980s. At levels both institutional and personal, rural counterinsurgency brought monarchy and military into close and sustained collaboration.

While violence and coercion most marked Thai counterinsurgency, it was not in the main their use that gave rise to this collaboration. Violence

and coercion shared prominence with another approach to besting the CPT in the countryside: the military's programme of *kitchakan phonlaruean*, or what are in *Infiltrating Society* termed "civil affairs projects". At the centre of that programme stood military involvement in "development for security" and in the creation of an array of mass organizations. The armed forces of the Bangkok state sought through development projects meant to win "hearts and minds", and through the mobilization of—above all—rural Thais into mass organizations, to prosecute a "political offensive" against the CPT. The state's goal of cultivating royalism notwithstanding, this latter strategy of mobilizing the populace followed the example of communist revolutionary practice. Its adoption reflected an awareness that the Bangkok state faced a political challenge rather than a primarily military threat. This awareness resulted in the politics-first strategy of *kanmueang nam kanthahan*, pursued in the main under the auspices of the Communist Suppression Operations Command (CSOC)—later and still today called the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC).

*Infiltrating Society* suggests that, in its original Cold War context, much about this approach was essentially fantasy. The Thai military's attempt to wage a political offensive from the mid-1960s and through the 1970s proved largely ineffective. Coercion, including the often heavy-handed use of force, remained the defining trait of counterinsurgency practice. Efforts at popular mobilization through the creation of mass organizations proved a poor fit with the realities of rural society, despite the frequent willingness of local notables to participate in or support those organizations. Those efforts proved one more chapter in the long history of the Bangkok state's and Thai metropolitan elites' sociological misapprehension or mismapping of the provincial hinterlands that they sought to dominate.

\* \* \*

The decidedly indifferent results of the Thai military's civil affairs projects notwithstanding, those projects outlasted the demise of the CPT in the 1980s. The involvement of the Bangkok state's military in internal security became so routine that it rarely drew comment, let alone analysis or criticism. But the survival of an approach to internal security dating from the counterinsurgency era gave that military a repertoire of stratagems that it could remobilize at any time. Puangthong offers the first comprehensive account of just such a remobilization, initially undertaken as a deliberate response to the energetic electoral politics that marked the first decade of the present century in Thailand.

On one level, and not least as it concerns mass organizations, that remobilization has reflected a lack of imagination or of new thinking. It has revealed a decision to double down on the not terribly successful approach of the past to meet the challenges of a very different present. On another level, however, it reveals just how central to the Thai military's understanding of both its political role and its relationship to society internal security and civil affairs projects have remained all along. *Infiltrating Society* offers invaluable perspective on the implications of that understanding for Thai democracy. It argues that counterinsurgency as ostensibly pursued by political means and through civil affairs projects served as a "springboard" for the military's lasting involvement in the socio-economic and political realms. The book thus makes clear that the challenge to democracy and democratic government posed by the military is far more fundamental than a storied propensity to mount coups and install dictatorial rule, naked or otherwise, in the aftermath of those coups.

Central to this point is Puangthong's analysis of two prime ministerial orders promulgated by the government of General Prem Tinsulanonda, himself a veteran of counterinsurgent activities in Northeast Thailand, in 1980 and 1982. The near-universal understanding of these orders as "magic spells" cast to bring about the ultimate defeat of the CPT by political rather than military means has always been puzzling. It is hard to square with the historical record. In *Infiltrating Society*, Puangthong has no time for this understanding, or in fact for this puzzle. The import of these orders, the book points out, has lain far less in their long-exaggerated relevance to the defeat of the CPT than in their crystallizing the military's politics-first, notionally civil-affairs-oriented, approach to counterinsurgency into what proved a robust political vision.

Central to that vision, as it had been implicit in counterinsurgency for much of the fifteen years preceding the promulgation of the two orders, was the integration of the people of a still predominantly rural Thailand—the subjects of the ninth Chakri monarch—into the nation as members of mobilized but pliable masses. That socio-political vision motivated the launch and oversight of mass organizations on the part of the CSOC, then of the ISOC, and also of numerous other organs of the Bangkok state.

The prominence of those organizations went hand in hand with that of "community development" during the counterinsurgency era. Indeed, the mobilization of rural people into mass organizations and the submission of their settlements to community development work were grounded in a single ideological project. Programmes in community development brought at least superficial material benefits to the settlements in which rural Thais lived.

Perhaps more significantly, they also had the goal of reinforcing pseudo-organicist conceptions of the village community. While those conceptions were destined to have a long, strange afterlife in the thinking of putative progressives in Thailand, their significance to the counterinsurgency project was straightforward. Members of the rural masses lived in communities, and those villagers need not concern themselves with public affairs at scales greater than that of the community. Or so the vision had it.

At the core of the vision, as embodied no less in the mobilization of mass organizations than in community development, stood a determination to forge an unmediated relationship between state and society. An energetic sovereign and his consort, willing during the era of counterinsurgency and for some years thereafter to undertake an active programme of visits across provincial Thailand to promote “development” and to link rural people to the kingdom’s exemplary centre, also served this purpose admirably for several decades. Numerous familiar, iconic photographs underline the direct contact with rural people that these visits afforded King Bhumibol. For all their brevity, the photogenic immediacy of such encounters was crucial.

That immediacy was of a piece with the attempts on the part of the Bangkok state’s military to shape and then to manipulate, as if in the management of a vast front organization, a large segment of Thai society. Complemented by royalist ideology—and almost certainly by the progressive resacralization of the Thai monarchy—and touted as democratic, the vision outlined in Prem’s famous orders of the early 1980s prescribed what amounted to an illiberal project of depoliticization, *um integralismo à tailandesa*. Like many corporatist visions, this one afforded ample opportunities for major business concerns. In the Thai case, the interest of such concerns was in penetrating and exploiting the countryside. Puangthong notes the example of the infamous military-backed “Green Isan” project. Initiated in the same decade that saw the promulgation of Prem’s orders, the project sought to foster large-scale commercial forestry on land cultivated by tens of thousands of Northeastern small-holders.

*Infiltrating Society* makes repeated reference to the apparent obliviousness of the leadership of elected governments and of much of the public to the implications of the expansive internal security role of the Thai military. This obliviousness has led democratic forces in Thailand to forfeit oversight of the military’s deep engagement with—or infiltration of—Thai society. Perhaps more significantly, and for the same reason, those forces have also effectively tolerated the military’s active promotion of a form of state-society relations incompatible with liberal democracy.

The crux of that incompatibility is the role in mediating between state and society that political contestation, elections and parties play in a liberal democratic order. The illiberal and depoliticizing vision that the Thai military of today has inherited from the counterinsurgency era cannot abide either that role or the closely related substantive function of political parties as vehicles for the articulation of competing interests. Recent indicators of this intolerance are abundant, and clear.

The constitutionally binding twenty-year National Strategy published in October 2018 by the National Council for Peace and Order junta assigns—or rather reassigns—a leading role to “communities” as points of interface between state and society. It thus both demarcates a radically constricted sphere of legitimate political participation and ideologically obviates the need, above all among the residents of provincial Thailand, for recourse to political parties as vehicles for the expression of their will. At the same time, and in another distinct echo of the 1980s, the document outlining the strategy would foster metropolitan business interests’ economic domination of the provinces, following a model that two influential Thai political scientists label “hierarchical capitalism”.

Similarly, the three-year National Security Policy and Plan released in November 2019 stresses the importance of building “immunity” to political contestation, and thus to the appeal of political parties and politicians, among individuals and communities and in society as a whole. This same determination to immunize and depoliticize accounted for the dissolution of the maverick new Future Forward Party in February 2020 and the use of the legal system to harass its leadership. That party’s decidedly liberal orientation, its programmatic challenge to the place of the armed forces in the Thai order and to the power of oligopolistic business interests, and its remarkable appeal to young and impatient voters presented an elemental challenge to the political vision of the Thai military.

As these developments unfold, *Infiltrating Society* emphasizes, Thailand continues to witness the reinvigoration of extant state-sponsored mass organizations and the mobilization of new ones. The project to render society pliable carries on. But persistent efforts of Thailand’s “military state within the state” in the realm of internal security have left it above all in the role of spoiler. Events of recent decades make evident that its illiberal and depoliticizing vision is an even poorer fit with contemporary Thai society than with the less complex and sophisticated Thai society of the counterinsurgency era. There is no place in that vision for what scholars have variously called a “middle-income peasantry”, “cosmopolitan villagers” and “urbanized villagers”, let alone for the young people for whom the ideals

of the Future Forward Party had such strong appeal. At the same time, Puangthong observes pointedly, pending the cessation of the military's internal security activities in all their ambitiousness, electoral democracy in Thailand remains condemned to fragility and instability.

\* \* \*

In demonstrating both the chronic ineffectiveness of the Thai military's approach to internal security affairs as a socio-political vision and its effect in undermining the prospects of an alternative, liberal democratic order, *Infiltrating Society* speaks to the central issue in Thai history in the past century and a third. This issue is the quest for national integration in all its dimensions—political, economic, social, cultural, ideological and even linguistic. Contests over who in state or society sets the terms for that integration, whether those terms are exclusionary or aim at inclusiveness, what means of and social bases for that integration are viable and realistic, and how to structure a balanced and just relationship between the great primate city of Bangkok and its broad and varied provincial hinterlands have long defined that quest. They continue to define it today.

A number of the most noteworthy developments in the history of modern Thailand have reflected efforts to set those terms. The 1890s saw Prince Damrong Rajanubhab give momentum to the work of centralizing provincial administration, often at the expense of local lords, under the *thesaphiban* system. Following the end of the absolute monarchy, the 1930s brought the introduction of a parliament featuring members whose explicit function—a remarkable innovation that historians seem to take for granted—was to represent individual provinces and the residents of those provinces. In a related development, that same era saw the promotion of constitutionalism as an integrative ideology across the length and breadth of the country. Beginning a quarter-century later, during the 1957–63 dictatorship of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, the promotion of the Thai monarchy would have the same integrative or unifying aim.

Still other efforts to set the terms of Thai national integration have included the Bangkok state's creation of organs to promote "community development" in the late 1950s and early 1960s, noted above, and the still contested steps towards meaningful administrative decentralization introduced in Thailand's 1997 Constitution. The pair of widely heralded if misunderstood orders promulgated by Prime Minister Prem in the early 1980s were also very much part of the tradition of attempts to effect and to control national integration in Thailand, as is the equally poorly understood but much less discussed 2018–37 National Strategy crafted by the dictatorial National Council for Peace and Order regime.

The vision laid out in the Prem-era orders had an unmistakable influence on that strategy. As Puangthong stresses, that lasting influence reflects the importance of Cold War counterinsurgency as the crucible for the Thai military's internal security activities and the vision that informs them. While the power of that legacy certainly points to stagnation in military thought during the last thirty years, it would be wrong to dismiss it as a matter of mere ideological anachronism. Rather, the Bangkok state's continued recourse to a repertoire of stratagems conceived to counter the CPT reflects an understanding, conscious or not, that the insurgency mounted by that party and the effort to defeat that insurgency together represented one more episode in the long quest for national integration and contest over its terms. That contest predated by many decades the threat posed by the CPT, and the demise of the party in no way signalled its end. Nor did it necessarily indicate the obsolescence of stratagems conceived in the face of that specific threat, as the discussion in *Infiltrating Society* of the Thai military's ever-broader understanding of security illustrates.

Puangthong highlights the preparatory function of the prime ministerial orders of the 1980s that gave explicit expression to the stratagems developed in the Bangkok state's contest with the CPT. Those orders lay the foundation for the Thai military's continued active role in national integration. Among younger historians of Southeast Asia, scholarship scrutinizing the impact of the Cold War on, its long-term legacies for, the region has become fashionable. On one level, today's Thai military and its internal security activities, the Thai monarchy of the reign of King Bhumibol, and the relationship between the two institutions that has so distorted Thai political life for decades would appear to represent just such a legacy. But to restrict oneself to that level of understanding is myopic, and to view those two integrative institutions and the durability of the stratagems for national integration associated with their relationship in a time horizon of just sixty or even eighty years is an historiographic misstep. Those institutions' prominence in the post-1945 era notwithstanding, the story of Thailand's quest for integration and contest over the appropriate and just means to effect it long predated the Cold War. They have outlasted the counterinsurgency era. That attempts on the part of the Bangkok state, no matter how futile, to apply tools forged in that era continue is no surprise. Likewise, in the history of that quest and that contest, the recent prominence of Thailand's soldiers and its sovereigns comprises but a brief chapter—to be followed by other, perhaps very different, chapters, in which other, perhaps very different, actors may figure as the protagonists.

In its treatment of the internal security activities and civil affairs projects of the Thai military, *Infiltrating Society* invites comparison between the example of Thailand and those of other countries, both in Southeast Asia and outside the region. The volume can certainly inform understanding of the long, prominent and continuing “civic action” tradition of the Armed Forces of the Philippines and of the political implications of that tradition, just as that tradition can inform understanding of the Thai experience. The same is true of the socio-political vision associated with the concepts of the “family state” and the “floating mass” in New Order Indonesia. Further, the Thai military’s adoption of a strategy of counterinsurgent mobilization occurred in the same period that saw the governments of the United States and the Republic of Vietnam move to enhance “pacification” efforts in rural southern Vietnam under the broad framework of “Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support”, or CORDS—with its development cadres and determination to match the communists’ revolution with the Saigon government’s own. To turn to comparisons beyond Southeast Asia, the concerns of *Infiltrating Society* overlap with those of scholarship on the “professionalism”—whether “old” or “new”—of Latin American militaries in the twentieth century and on the political attitudes and political involvement associated with it.

Puangthong Pawakapan’s most pressing concern is, however, the state of her own country, the unending involvement of whose military in politics is of more than historical interest. *Infiltrating Society* draws on Puangthong’s historical perspective, her masterful use of sources and, above all, on her deep—and increasingly widely shared—conviction that much in Thailand need not be as it is. Her book makes clear the ineffectiveness of the Thai military’s involvement in internal security affairs as an approach to both political manipulation and national integration, despite the persistence of that involvement. The roots of this chronic failure to build a viable relationship between Bangkok and the society of its provincial hinterlands by militarized means lie in that approach’s long-evident and ever-increasing irrelevance to Thai social realities. This failure has meant that almost all that the military’s civil affairs projects and internal security activities have to show for themselves is the stunting of Thailand’s electoral democracy.

Read with this outcome in mind, Puangthong’s closely considered study amounts to a trenchant argument for giving Thai liberal democracy a chance. It underlines Thailand’s need to double down this time on elections, political parties and contestation among those parties—to bet on representative structures whose design ensures the participation in the national life of

provincial voters and of urban voters whose origins lie in the provinces. This bet holds out integrative possibilities with the flexibility to meet the demands of ongoing and unpredictable social change.

The title of *Infiltrating Society* is apt: Thai national integration must work as a social project, and not just a spatial one. In one of just a few, perhaps unwitting, gestures towards poignancy in her book, Puangthong leaves little doubt about who may stand to benefit from Thailand's taking a genuine chance on liberal democracy. The Bangkok state's mass organizations—with their uniforms and the sense of power and authority that those uniforms convey, and with the possibility of forging connections with influential patrons that participation in those organizations may bring—have long had particular appeal for marginalized Thais of modest means and modest levels of education, Puangthong writes. Membership in those organizations has thus held out at least an imagined refuge from precarity in Thailand's infamously unequal society. Taking a moment to think about the nature of that attraction will break the heart of any reader who knows Thailand. It will also bring home the urgency of replacing the failed, six-decade-old, military-led approach to national integration with one that better matches Thai realities and better meets Thai needs.

# Preface

I grew up in an area adjacent to Bangkok's Ratchadamnoen Avenue, the centre stage of many significant events in modern Thai politics. I had the opportunity to witness several popular demonstrations, beginning with the 14 October 1973 uprising, and too many military coups d'état. Even before the generals made a public announcement, I knew we had another coup when the phone line at home was cut off and the area was swarming with soldiers and military trucks. Despite being familiar with this vicious cycle of civilian government and military rule, I refuse to accept that military rule is the norm for Thailand. It is frustrating to see the growing popularity of the military among a large section of people, the consolidation of military power, the increasing militarization of society in various aspects, the lack of accountability for those involved in violent crackdowns, and the impunity that the military and the rightist elite enjoy. Still, like the majority of Thai people, I have long overlooked the political apparatus of the military. Like most others, I paid attention to the military mainly when the country was under its rule.

The sweeping and heavy-handed attempts of the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), the junta of the 22 May 2014 coup, to impose its version of security and order in civil space triggered my curiosity. The first unusual activities of the NCPO I noticed took place soon after the coup. For example, there were forced evictions of small farmers from the forest reserve areas, an obsession with management of traffic and street food in Bangkok, remobilization of many mass organizations, the resurfacing of the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) in news headlines, and the establishment of ISOC-led popular surveillance mechanisms in Bangkok and the provinces. The longer the NCPO stayed in power, the more expansive and intensive the military's political control over civilian lives became, justified on grounds of the nation's internal security. I could not find a satisfactory answer to why all this happened. The matter was too important to ignore. I decided to dig for more information. This became my first research project on the Thai military, a topic I had never thought I would address, mainly because I do not enjoy the politics of cliques and classes, a dominant feature of Thai military studies, and partly because the military's machoism dulls my interest. This may be my weak point. Fortunately, my research mainly deals with the military's civil affairs.

At the beginning of my research, I began to notice that the attempt to impose firm control over the people and electoral politics began soon

after the 2006 military coup, which brought down the hugely popular elected government of Thaksin Shinawatra. Development for security programmes, the ISOC-dominated mass organizations, state surveillance in various forms, ideological indoctrination and the counter-democracy psychological warfare proliferated from then onwards. These were once the major components of Thailand's counterinsurgency operations. The military has given them a new euphemistic label as *kitchakan phonlaruen khong thahan* or the military's civil affairs.

To understand what the military is doing with its political apparatus at present, I had to look back to the counterinsurgency period, when the foundations were laid for the Thai military's internal security operations, including the definition of national security, and the key concepts and methods to fight the internal threats, which are still relevant today. On the one hand, these old concepts and methods are obsolete, indicating the military's failure to catch up with the modern world. On the other hand, their continued use shows that the military and its conservative allies never abandoned the remnants of the counterinsurgency operations despite the demise of communism decades ago. They proudly believe that these old methods will bring them victory over internal threats, just as they did over the Communist Party of Thailand. I argue that such a belief is a political myth. However, in Thailand a myth may give life to a gigantic political apparatus which grants greater power to the military and the establishment.

ISOC is known as the key agency in charge of Thailand's internal security affairs since the counterinsurgency period. In fact, all branches of the armed forces have been actively involved in various internal security programmes. The military has never waged a large-scale warfare with an external enemy since its modernization in the early twentieth century. Internal security has become the *raison d'être* of the Thai armed forces, defining its main mission, operations, perception of its role towards national institutions, the people and its political power. This book is, therefore, not just about ISOC. The agency's coordinating authority enables the military to dominate and direct other government bodies, even when the country is under a civilian government.

Whether or not Thailand is under military rule, the bureaucracy of internal security is present on a routine basis. The attempt to keep society under control requires persistence and patience. The military coup is a convenient way for the military and its allies to amplify its power in the short term, but commanding the loyalty of the people and mobilizing them in mass organizations is more effective in the long run. On the one hand, this strategy allows the military and conservative elites to dictate the

country's long-term political direction. On the other hand, this strategy creates division among the people and thus makes democratization in the future more difficult. Thailand will not escape the vicious cycle of coups and weak civilian governments as long as the infrastructure of power is controlled and manipulated by the military and its conservative allies. As an academic and a citizen, I wish this book could help reshape the understanding of military-state-society relations in and beyond Thailand. I feel an obligation to inform people about what the military and its allies are doing. Thailand may soon return to civilian rule but a genuine reform of the security sector will never happen until the role of the military's political apparatus is understood and addressed.

Since embarking on this book in 2017, I have written a few articles in Thai and English, given talks in public and closed-door forums, and been interviewed by the press. I believe that a good proportion of politically active citizens are now aware of the political projects of the military and ISOC. However, there are constraints on what I can say to the press and in open forums in Thailand. Writing in English allows me to put these constraints aside and write with greater freedom.

I do not deny that I have a firm political position and I make no effort to hide it. I believe in a free and fair political system with good governance, transparency, and accountability, all of which military governments have failed to provide for the Thai people in the past, and will continue to fail in the future. Under military-led authoritarian rule, people have paid too high a price for too long a time. I hope readers will appreciate the research, the substantial evidence and the serious arguments in this book.

*Puangthong Pawakapan*  
*Bangkok in the time of Covid-19*  
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