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***Branding Authoritarian Nations: Political Legitimation and Strategic National Myths in Military-Ruled Thailand*. By Petra Alderman. New York City, New York: Routledge, 2024. Hardcover: 252pp.**

Petra Alderman chose an ideal case study to investigate "nation branding", a concept coined by Simon Anholt in 1998 and later developed by Peter van Ham in *Foreign Affairs* in 2001. Initially, it meant that the reputation of a country was similar to that of the brand of a company or product. It was later revised to be more closely associated with national identity and economic competitiveness. In an era of complex geopolitics, a state's success on the world stage depends more on its "perceived attractiveness rather than military might", Alderman writes (p. 3). Thus, she adeptly builds upon van Ham's concept and uniquely applies it to Thailand during its most recent period of military rule (2014–19). Other observers of Thai politics have also noted elements of nation branding, such as the junta's "Return Happiness to the People" campaign. This carefully managed public-relations effort included the production of patriotic films, soldiers ordered to pose for photos in uniform when patrolling the streets of Bangkok and a trite song bearing the name of the junta leader, Prayut Chan-ocha. This period of military rule provides rich material for analysing Thailand's "inward-looking" legitimation strategy, which Alderman argues contained carefully crafted imagery, ideas of nationalism, and dichotomies of "us and them" to construct a "reimagined" national identity centred on a projected sense of unity, with its branding built around establishing ideas of "happiness" (pp. 4–5).

The book's six chapters analyse separate components of nation-building efforts and how different sectors of society under state control—tourism, economics, foreign investment, education, culture, public relations and private enterprise—contributed to expanding the authoritarian government's traditional toolbox to include not just state repression and the weaponization of institutions and the legal system. Chapter One examines nation branding by authoritarian states in general before carefully applying it to Thailand. After the Cold War, Alderman notes, democratization was not the only alternative to authoritarian regimes. Indeed, many prolonged their power by adopting softer strategies for their rule, made possible by nation branding. The introductory chapter details, for instance, the creation of strategic national myths that can be mobilized to "promote or resist social change" (p. 20). This can be seen in Thai

history, too. Phibun Songkhram, Thailand's military ruler from the late 1930s until the late 1950s, fostered military-oriented nationalism and popularized the term "Thainess" to create a sense of national unity after the fall of the absolute monarchy in 1932. Sarit Thanarat, a general who seized power in a coup in 1957, sought to create a symbiotic relationship with King Bhumibol Adulyadej to rebuild the status and prestige of the monarchy, as well as to preserve his own authoritarian rule, setting in motion events that would seer into the public's mind Bhumibol's image as the sole arbiter of major political crises.

Chapters Two, Three and Four assess the nation-branding strategy of the junta that took power in 2014. After that year's coup, the junta launched "information operations" containing elements of soft power, strategic communications and propaganda. The National Council for Peace and Order, as the junta was formally known, created the myth of a "good" people living under the guidance of a benevolent leader. It emphasized different themes each year. In 2014, for instance, the focus was on virtuousness, with the rollout of Prayut's 12 core Thai values, public events such as "Bike for Mom" and "Bike for Dad" and the reopening of Rajabhakti Park, which reinforced the importance of the Thai monarchy on the nation's social life. In 2016, after the death of King Bhumibol, the junta emphasized national unity through the co-optation of national grief for the late monarch. It encouraged Thais to wear dark clothing and carefully managed public mourning events (pp. 55–61). Externally, tourism, which suffered because of the 2014 coup, was boosted through public relations campaigns that masked realities on the ground. For example, Alderman details the junta's attempts to brand Thailand as a nation of diversity, such as being an ideal tourism location for the international LGBTQ community, despite that community in Thailand still facing "everyday discrimination" (p. 83).

One key takeaway from Chapter Three is that not all the strategies employed—particularly in foreign policy, namely a failed attempt to gain a seat on the UN Human Rights Council—needed to succeed. Instead, the junta's broader goals were more important than individual strategies of dismantling opposition political networks and turning public attention away from Thailand's sociopolitical problems, such as rising economic inequality and deep political divisions. Chapter Four examines internal branding in education, culture and the private sector. Thai education was particularly vulnerable to Prayut's core values agenda because of the reputation of schools as incubators of authoritarian values that are reinforced

by teachers and rectors who have near total authority over students. At the same time, the junta aimed to instil nationalist notions of Thainess to create a sense of loyalty and unity through cultural and private-sector public relations campaigns.

Domestically, the results of the junta's nation branding efforts were mixed, as detailed in Chapter Five. Indeed, branding efforts across different Thai constituencies often failed, particularly in north and northeast Thailand (anti-junta strongholds), where many people felt "under-represented" and where efforts to legitimize the junta failed because pre-existing social, economic and political cleavages were difficult to overcome (p. 175). For instance, while the junta branded itself as arch-royalist, many people were put off by the controversies surrounding the new monarch, King Vajiralongkorn, especially when they compared him to his father, whom most Thais saw as virtuous. The junta's failures are also evident in Chapter Six, which delves into political marketing. The junta attempted to brand itself with a "technocratic" image and present itself as an ally of the country's large Sino-Thai business community. In 2015, it developed the *pracharat* ("people's state") brand, a term picked from the Thai national anthem, as an alternative to the style of populism employed by the opposition parties linked to Thaksin Shinawatra, who served as prime minister from 2001 to 2006 (p. 65). Again, however, these branding efforts largely failed because pre-existing political divisions were difficult to surmount. Meanwhile, younger Thais were less vulnerable to the junta's messaging because of their access to alternative, non-state sources of information, thanks in part to the rise of social media and easier access to smartphones.

Alderman's doctoral thesis, now this Routledge-published book, is profound, highly citable, empirically rich and well-argued. It will hopefully start a debate over the effectiveness of an authoritarian government's expanded toolbox, especially compared to the current wave of progressive, democratic resistance among younger Thais. It also adds to the conversation about the waning ability of conservatives to monopolize Thai identity because of a diversifying notion of what is truly Thai. Hopefully, this book can spawn a resurgence of academic literature that explores how authoritarian governments attempt to construct and restrict social attitudes and behaviours.

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