

Opinion

# **The Land of the Free? - Thailand's kingdom of enslavement**

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## **Ignoring reasonable reform demands could force end of palace-military nexus.**

Thailand has always characterized itself proudly as the Land of the Free. As Thais often say, the word “Thai” literally means being free, or independent. But after security forces moved in on youth protesters camped in front of Government House in the early hours of Oct.15, there is once more a bitter aftertaste: Thailand is not a kingdom of the free but of the enslaved.

The coup in 2006 against the second elected government of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra was backed by the palace and the privy council headed by Prem Tinsulanonda, a former army chief and prime minister. Thailand's weak democratization efforts have been spiraling downward ever since. In the last 14 years, two elected governments were ousted in so-called “judicial coups” and one in 2014 by a regular military coup. The latter delivered army chief Gen. Prayuth Chan-ocha to the premiership — where he remains ensconced to this day.

During that same period, the palace-military nexus has remained intact, and protests against authoritarian rule have been violently suppressed three times — with the deaths of over 90 people in 2010. Since 2014, Prime Minister Prayuth's government has morphed from a junta into a quasi-democratic coalition by way of a military-dictated constitution and an unbalanced election system.

Only the naive and blind would see this as a democratic regime when it depends for its security on an unelected senate and a fickle, pro-establishment judiciary. With an economically weakened press and powerful business interests in play, the voices of ordinary people are deeply repressed. The real Thailand is anything but the land of the free.

The latest actions by security forces against youth protesters continue a long tradition that has been particularly well honored over the past six years. Once again, we are witnessing reckless and heartless treatment of highschool and college students who are in their late teens and early twenties — the very people who will one day have to take responsibility for the state of the nation bequeathed to them.

To the outside world up to 2006, Thailand was ostensibly a parliamentary democracy. In reality, the Thai version of the Westminster system has been dominated by the monarchy throughout — a royalist democracy that explicitly outlawed even criticism of the monarchy. The coup in 2006 confirmed that the royalist-military nexus was prepared to cast off any democratic facade to ensure its survival. The much more forceful and decisive coup of 2014 was necessary to shore up this relationship in the twilight years of King Bhumibol Adulyadej's reign, and to secure the succession.

The royalist-military nexus is a legacy of the long and unfinished transition from absolute monarchy. The genuine constitutional democracy promised by the People's Party, the backers of the 1932

revolution against King Prajadhipok, has never really been achieved. Royalists worked hard to rebuild their position after the disorientation of World War II and effective Japanese occupation. By the mid-1970s — the height of the Cold War — the monarchy had achieved uncontested moral authority. That influence was subsequently converted to political dominance, which endures to this day.

It is not clear the extent to which King Vajiralongkorn was directly involved in the Oct. 15 crackdown, but one of the apparent pretexts was the alleged obstruction of a royal motorcade carrying Queen Suthida and Prince Dipangkorn — King Vajiralongkorn's fifth son from his third marriage — by chanting protesters flashing signature three-finger salutes.

Forty-four years ago, in October 1976, there was a far more serious incident involving the alleged hanging in effigy of then Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn by students acting out the recent murder of two activists upcountry by police. The concocted student threat to the heir to throne in 1976 was one of the main pretexts for the brutal massacre of more than 40 students at Thammasat University.

Times have changed. In the 1970s, the state controlled much of the print media and all the national airwaves. Today's social media operate largely beyond the reach of controlling Thai officials — and questions are already being asked about how Queen Suthida's convoy could possibly have strayed into a crowd of demonstrators, fortunately peaceful.

It is unfortunate that the protesters' demands for reform of the monarchy — not its abolition — have not been taken seriously since they are key to securing the institution's lasting future. Over the past two decades, strong criticism has brewed over the monarchy's influence over politics, particularly its endorsement of military coups. This was mitigated to a significant degree by genuine reverence the late king accrued during his 70-year reign. His successor does not enjoy that protective aura.

In just four years since his father's death, King Vajiralongkorn has made a number of serious transgressions that have stoked controversy, including the transfer of the crown's wealth into his own name. Despite being titular head of the military, the king has taken direct command of the two most powerful army regiments stationed in Bangkok. He also forced amendments to the new constitution according to his personal needs after it had been approved by national referendum in 2016.

These actions have gone unchallenged in public, in part because the draconian law of lese-majeste — which outlaws any criticism of the monarch — shields the king from any accountability. Youthful demands to place the king above politics and strictly under the constitution would benefit both democracy and the monarchy in the long run. There have been quite detailed suggestions on the necessary constitutional amendments and instruments to use, but the government has lent a tin ear to them and seems intent on simply annihilating the reformist movement.

It has to be said that the Thai state has never really worked in the service of ordinary people. For centuries, feudal regimes have cast themselves as "protectors" of the people. But the real question is: protecting whom from what?

Official Thai histories play up battles with intrusive foreign adversaries, but how much was this really about ensuring the king was powerful enough to ward off domestic rebellions? People had to comply with this protection to avoid punishment. In some ways, it was a form of slavery under a mafia-like state providing protection from itself.

The modern Thai state, from the absolute monarchy of old to the authoritarian regimes of today, has

never really relinquished this mentality or the power that sustains it. In this latest battle, the state is trying to prevail over the pro-democracy movement by arresting its leaders in order to weaken and quell its supporters. But this strategy could backfire. Within twelve hours of yesterday's crackdown, a large crowd peacefully defied the emergency decree's ban on large assemblies by occupying a major intersection in one of Bangkok's main retail and business districts. They also promised more rallies in the coming days around the capital.

The fight burning in the hearts and minds of this young generation is beyond state control. By clinging to the past and to domination, the monarch and the military have failed so far to engage with peaceful calls for reform, placing the kingdom on a turbulent downward path. By ignoring the need for necessary change, the old order may be digging its own grave.

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