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978-1-107-06181-1 - The Political Development of Modern Thailand

Federico Ferrara

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## The Political Development of Modern Thailand

Based on extensive empirical research, *The Political Development of Modern Thailand* analyses the country's political history from the late nineteenth century to the present day. Long known for political instability, Thailand was thrust into a deep state of crisis by a royalist military coup staged in 2006. Since then, conservative royalists have overthrown more elected governments after violent street protests, while equally disruptive demonstrations staged by supporters of electoral democracy were crushed by military force. Federico Ferrara traces the roots of the crisis to unresolved struggles regarding the content of Thailand's national identity, dating back to the abolition of absolute monarchy in 1932. He explains the conflict's re-intensification with reference to a growing chasm between the hierarchical world view of Thailand's hegemonic 'royal nationalism' and the aspirations that millions of ordinary people have come to harbour as a result of modernization.

FEDERICO FERRARA is Assistant Professor in the Department of Asian and International Studies at the City University of Hong Kong.

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Frontmatter

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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It is a good working rule to be suspicious about political and intellectual leaders who talk mainly about moral virtues; many poor devils are liable to be badly hurt.

– Barrington Moore

## Contents

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<i>List of figures and tables</i>	<i>page</i> viii
<i>Preface</i>	xi
1 Unfinished business	1
2 The birth of ‘Thainess’	39
3 Revolution forsworn	75
4 The age of betrayal	109
5 The good dictatorship	145
6 Rise of the politicians	183
7 Barbarians at the gate	220
8 State of unexception	266
<i>Bibliography</i>	296
<i>Index</i>	323

## Figures and tables

---

### Figures

Map	The Kingdom of Thailand	<i>page</i>	ix
1.1	Thailand's Freedom House ratings, 1972–2013		7
1.2	Thai regimes and income per capita, 1929–2012		26
7.1	Provincial income per capita and ethno-linguistic diversity		253
7.2	Election performance of parties led or backed by Thaksin Shinawatra		254

### Tables

6.1	Thailand's party system, 1975–1988		200
6.2	Thailand's general elections, 1992–1996		214
7.1	Thailand's general elections, 2001–2005		226
7.2	Thailand's general elections, 2007–2011		242





Map The Kingdom of Thailand  
 Based on original design by Daniel Dalet (<http://d-maps.com>).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-06181-1 - The Political Development of Modern Thailand

Federico Ferrara

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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## Preface

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On the evening of 11 October 1933, troops of the Royal Thai Army based in Nakhon Ratchasima and Ayutthaya marched into the northern outskirts of the city of Bangkok. The rebels struck just as Siam's first legislative elections, staggered over several weeks, were being held throughout the country. The 'National Salvation Council' (*Khana Ku Ban Mueang*), featuring well-known conservative officials led by the former Minister of War, Prince Boworadet Kridakorn, had acted with the covert backing of senior members of the royal family, whose previous efforts to dislodge the new constitutional regime – established with the overthrow of the absolute monarchy on 24 June 1932 – had met with failure. After seizing the aerodrome at Don Muang on 12 October, the rebels issued an ultimatum to the Prime Minister, Colonel Phraya Phahon Phonphayuhasena, intimating that he resign within an hour. The rebels' missive and first public pronouncement (reproduced in Thamrongsak 2007: 109–13), printed on leaflets airdropped into the city, declared that the government had lost the trust of 'the people' and the legitimacy to rule. Chief among the administration's alleged misdeeds were encouraging public criticism of the monarchy, inviting civilian revolutionist Pridi Banomyong to return from exile, and reopening the legislature, which King Prajadhipok had prorogued in April 1933 to forestall passage of Pridi's 'communist' economic policies. The rebels further explained that the government planned to exploit its stranglehold over the legislature to usurp the King's powers, using the constitution only as a 'cover' (*khrueng kambang*) for its self-serving designs. While professing respect for the constitution, they stated that the government's behaviour had left them with no choice but to temporarily seize the country's administration through extra-constitutional means. They would relinquish power upon the installation of a royally appointed government, tasked with undertaking 'reforms' necessary to the establishment of a genuine constitutional monarchy, free of the influence of Pridi and his allies.

Eight decades on, Thailand is mired in much the same fight. On 24 November 2013, almost exactly 80 years after the crushing of Prince

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Federico Ferrara

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xii Preface

Boworadet's 'Blue Army' (see Nattapoll 2013: 27), a royalist crowd of 150,000 people demonstrated in Bangkok to demand the removal of Yingluck Shinawatra's elected government. With an assist by the Constitutional Court – days earlier, the Court had struck down an amendment to the constitution, ruling that parliament's attempt to institute a fully elected Senate amounted to an act of sedition against 'Democracy with the King as Head of State' – protest leaders called for a 'People's Revolution' (*patiwat prachachon*) to 'defend the constitution'. They also presented the success of their seizure of power as the only way to prevent parliament from reviving an amnesty bill that would permit billionaire former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra to return from exile without serving a 2-year prison sentence, imposed after a military coup forcibly removed him in 2006. Fronting the protests this time were the scions of some of Thailand's richest families, like beer heiress Chitpas Kridakorn, and high-ranking officials of the Democrat Party – an organization whose founders in 1946 included veterans of the royalist counter-revolution of the 1930s. Like Prince Boworadet before them, the leaders of a party that had not managed a plurality of the vote since 1992, despite the financial backing of some of the country's largest business conglomerates, arrogated the right to speak for all 'the people' in declaring the elected government 'null and void' (*mokha*) and in stating their intent to overthrow the 'Thaksin System' – shorthand for 'the dictatorship of capitalist political parties through the parliamentary system' (*phadetkan doi phak kan mueang nai thun nai rabop ratthasapha*). Taking another page from Prince Boworadet's playbook, protest leader Suthep Thaugsuban complemented his call to 'protect the constitution' with the demand that its provisions be set aside for the sake of allowing 'good people' (*khon di*) to run the government. Rejecting the electoral process as irremediably tainted by the participation of corruptible provincial voters, Suthep and his supporters demanded that power be transferred to an unelected 'People's Council', which would be tasked with uprooting Thaksin's influence as well as enacting 'reforms' designed to usher in an 'absolute' (*sombun*) version of 'Democracy with the King as Head of State'.

Thaksin Shinawatra, to be clear, is not Pridi Banomyong. For if Pridi was himself no saint, Thaksin's egocentrism and opportunism are in a league of their own. Even so, the reason why royalists have sought to make them into enemies of the state is one and the same: both men, for all their actual failings, are above all guilty of upsetting the 'natural' order of things, Thaksin having come as close as anyone to subverting the royalist order established upon the rollback of Pridi's 1932 revolution. Indeed, as profoundly as Thailand has changed since the mid 1930s, the country has yet conclusively to settle a dispute first occasioned by

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Federico Ferrara

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

its transformation into a bounded, absolutist kingdom at the turn of the last century, having failed to reach a basic consensus over just who ‘the people’ are, how the will of ‘the people’ is expressed, whether self-styled ‘good people’ are bound by the same rules as everyone else, and what rights and responsibilities, if any, different constituencies can legitimately claim for themselves. The unending succession of coups, constitutions, armed rebellions, and popular uprisings the country has experienced since 1932 is but the most visible manifestation of the unresolved nature of this conflict, rooted in the juxtaposition of fundamentally different conceptions of the Thai nation.

Beyond its leaders and the nature of their private agendas, the fight over the content of Thailand’s national identity – and, therefore, over the formal and informal institutions, constitutive of alternative political regimes, through which the nation exercises its sovereignty – has changed in three major respects over the intervening eight decades. First, and perhaps most obviously, the alignments have shifted. For if the small commoner bourgeoisie and its representatives in the armed forces and the civil service presented the most serious challenge to the power of the aristocracy back in the 1930s, these groups are now overwhelmingly (albeit not unanimously) in the royalist camp. In 2014, the task of removing an elected government that had shown uncommon resilience against the onslaught mounted by royalists in the streets, the courts, and the bureaucracy eventually fell upon the Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Thai Army, General Prayuth Chan-ocha. The suspension of the constitution and the wave of summons, searches, seizures, and arbitrary detentions that followed the military’s illegal seizure of power on 22 May were justified in the old royalist rhetoric of replacing ‘parliamentary dictatorship’ with ‘genuine democracy’. Second, the fight has broadened far beyond its original participants among urban elites, as ordinary citizens have become increasingly active on *both sides* of the ongoing struggle for the nation’s soul and future – in the words of E.E. Schattschneider, the conflict has been ‘nationalized’ (Schattschneider (1988[1960]: 10–11). Finally, the ‘nationalization’ of the fight between populist (egalitarian) and royalist (hierarchical) world views has resulted in its merger with regional cleavages that were also formed as a consequence of Thailand’s process of state formation, concerning the place that different regions and their ethnic populations have in the nation that was first imagined for them in Bangkok in the late nineteenth century. Today, royalist positions, political parties, and social movements draw much of their support from the Bangkok metropolitan area and the relatively affluent southern region, whose ethno-cultural heritage and political history are most closely intertwined with the kingdom’s core in central Thailand. More

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-06181-1 - The Political Development of Modern Thailand

Federico Ferrara

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xiv Preface

populist, egalitarian positions with regard to the form of government and the state's involvement in the economy, by contrast, have often since resonated in regions whose integration into Thailand's national territory was more recent and a great deal more problematic – above all, those northern and northeastern provinces inhabited, in their largest part, by peoples whom the authorities in Bangkok once collectively referred to as 'Lao'.

This book offers an explanation for Thailand's decades-long history of political instability, one that seeks to illuminate the elements of continuity and change instantiated in its ongoing political crisis. While much of the time it took to write it – a task on which I have focused almost single-mindedly since September 2011 – was spent in something of a self-imposed solitary confinement, I cannot fail to acknowledge the contributions many people have made, sometimes unwittingly, to making it a reality.

I came to the Thai Studies field relatively late and largely unaware of its unwelcoming reputation. Given that reputation, I am in retrospect even more grateful for the encouragement and support I almost invariably received from academics and writers more experienced than myself. I also wish to express my appreciation for the scholars, journalists, bloggers, activists, students, artists, novelists, and others in Bangkok and elsewhere who took the time to read, share, and comment on some of my earlier writings on Thailand. At the City University of Hong Kong, I have benefited from the assistance and guidance of a number of colleagues in the Department of Asian and International Studies, where I have worked since 2010. But for the insistence of Nick Thomas, risk averseness would likely have caused me to set my sights on a lesser publisher. Mark Thompson and Bill Case provided comments on parts of an earlier draft. Having put himself through the entire manuscript, James Buchanan offered a long list of valuable suggestions. Kyaw Yin Hlaing, Brad Williams, Jonathan London, and Chiara Formichi made frequent enquiries as to its progress, indulging my need to vent on whatever I was stuck on at the time. Our Department Head, Paul Cammack, went so far as to volunteer to teach one of my courses in early 2013, freeing up time I was able to dedicate to the book's completion. Most of all, I am indebted to my editor at Cambridge University Press for the thoughtfulness and care in handling my submission, as well as to the anonymous readers who reviewed the manuscript in as timely and as rigorous a fashion. It goes without saying that I bear sole responsibility for any errors.

Introducing a book that will likely define my professional reputation for some time to come also gives me a chance to properly acknowledge

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-06181-1 - The Political Development of Modern Thailand

Federico Ferrara

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

xv

the teachers and mentors who helped me get this far. At the University of Kansas – where I spent some of the best years of my life after leaving my hometown of Venice, Italy – Ronald Francisco first inspired me to embark on an academic career; with Paul Johnson and Erik Herron, he provided me with the skills and opportunities to pursue it to the best of my abilities. Just as valuable as the first-rate education I received upon venturing out of my comfort zone on Mt. Oread were the sobering life lessons I learned at Harvard University, a place where one is soon confronted with the limits of one's potential. The group of students who entered the Department of Government's doctoral programme in the summer of 2003 remains far and away the smartest bunch of people I have ever been around. Certainly, I learned more from them than I ever did in any classroom. At Harvard University, I was also fortunate to find a fantastic dissertation advisor in Peter Hall, whose dedication and wisdom I can only aspire vaguely to approximate. Judging from the outcome, the other members of my dissertation committee, Torben Iversen and Yoshiko Herrera, convincingly vouched for me with prospective employers when I first stepped into a tough job market. While the corroborating evidence may come in somewhat past its due date, I hope that this book's publication will go some distance towards justifying the investment of trust, time, and trouble each of these people – Ron, Erik, and Peter especially – have made in me.

Finally, an apology is owed to friends and family for the distance and aloofness I have often exhibited over the course of writing this book. All of you, no doubt, deserved better.

*17 June 2014*