

The two faces of Thai authoritarianism

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Thai politics has completed a dramatic turn from electoral authoritarianism under deposed premier Thaksin Shinawatra in 2001–2006 to a virtual military government under General Prayuth Chan-ocha. These two sides of the authoritarian coin, electoral and military, represent Thailand's painful learning curve. The most daunting challenge for the country is not to choose one or the other but to create a hybrid that combines electoral sources of legitimacy for democratic rule and some measure of moral authority and integrity often lacked by elected officials.



A decade ago, Thaksin was practically unchallenged in Thailand. He had earlier squeaked through an assets concealment trial on a narrow and questionable vote after nearly winning a majority in the January 2001 election. A consummate politician and former police officer, Thaksin benefited from extensive networks in business and the bureaucracy, including the police and army.

In politics, his Thai Rak Thai party became a juggernaut. It devised a popular policy platform, featuring affordable universal healthcare, debt relief and microcredit schemes. It won over most of the rural electorate and even the majority of Bangkok. Absorbing smaller parties, Thai Rak Thai virtually monopolised party politics in view of a weak opposition.

Thaksin penetrated and controlled supposedly independent agencies aimed at promoting accountability, particularly the Constitutional Court, the Election Commission and the Anti-Corruption Commission. His confidants and loyalists steered these agencies. His cousin became the army's Commander-in-Chief. His police cohorts were fast-tracked to senior

positions, including his brother-in-law, who became national police chief. Similarly, Thaksin's business allies and associated partners secured plum concessions and choice government procurement projects.

After his landslide victory in February 2005, Thaksin became the first prime minister to be re-elected and to preside over a government composed only of one party. But his virtual monopoly on Thai politics and accompanying hubris inevitably got the better of him. Making a lucrative business out of politics led to his demise in the September 2006 military coup. Thaksin's rule was democratic on paper but authoritarian in practice.

Yet Thaksin's legacy is already strong. His subsequent proxy governments in 2008 and 2011–2014, under his sister Yingluck Shinawatra, were politically paralysed by anti-Thaksin street protests. When Yingluck looked poised to complete her term, Thaksin's Pheu Thai party came up with a blanket amnesty bill that upended her government, assisted by the independent agencies that had turned against Thaksin in the 2006 coup. The putsch on 22 May 2014 was merely the knock-out blow on an ineffectual administration that was not allowed to govern.

Now [the pendulum has swung](#)^[1] to the other, authoritarian end. General Prayuth now heads a regime with no democratic pretences, ruling with absolute power. His is a military government both on paper and in practice. The tone of the 22 May coup clearly signalled that the military would dominate politics, epitomised by the general himself becoming prime minister.

Prayuth's allies under the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) have now taken key portfolios relating to the Thai economy and society, foreign affairs and internal security. The structure of power under the NCPO is clear.

Two months after seizing power, the NCPO rolled out an interim constitution and appointed a National Legislative Assembly (NLA). Today the NLA is filled not with business cronies and spouses of politicians but with military classmates and siblings, who in turn chose Prayuth as prime minister. The caretaker prime minister then selected his cabinet, more than one third of which is military. The National Reform Council (NRC) will soon be formed, leading to a constitution-drafting committee, which will be nominated by the NRC, NLA, cabinet and NCPO.

Like a politburo, the NCPO is thus the nexus of this interim governing structure, comprising the NLA, cabinet, and NRC. This monopoly of power is reminiscent of the Thaksin juggernaut a decade ago. It was a parliamentary dictatorship then as it is now. But the fundamental difference is that the current authoritarian period completely bypassed the electorate.

Prayuth enjoys the same immense personal popularity as Thaksin did. His no-nonsense state of the nation speeches have been to the point and delivered in appealing tones. The NCPO's anti-corruption campaign is popular and would certainly score more points if it dared to aim at higher-up corruption schemes and concessions, not just low-hanging fruits like extortion rackets that run motorcycle taxis and the state lottery.

Prayuth and the NCPO also benefit from the fact that public expectations started from a low base. After six months of anti-government street protests and policy paralysis, the coup was a

relief. Everyone had to make do with the coup because there was no initial alternative in the face of continuing martial law. But reality will start to bite as the military-dominated government starts its day-to-day work. The next 14 months of the NCPO's timetable to return to democratic rule may be long and hard.

The military-backed government faces a tall order dealing with the grievances and expectations of a neglected electorate. Those who spoke out against the political monster that the Thaksin regime eventually became must now be wary of the potential for the military-backed government setting on a similar path. Unaccountable power with absolute authority and direct rule is inadvisable in Thailand. Past experiences in the 1960s, early 1970s and 1991–1992 have shown that such governments eventually end in tears.

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[1] the pendulum has swung:

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[2] *here*:

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