

Autocratic Rule in Thailand and Its Neighbours

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Craig J. Reynolds, history professor at Australian National University, gave his perspective on politics in Thailand and other mainland Southeast Asian countries as part of the 'outsider view' lecture series organized by Midnight University and Chiang Mai University on 3 Aug.

In most countries, people want to be able to vote; they want the right to elect their leaders, and they form themselves into parties to put forward their representatives to run for elective office. But elections are not a reliable guide to telling us much about how government actually functions, and in trying to understand Thai politics, I think paying too much attention to electoral politics is misleading. The activities of political parties and elections obscure the way Thai politics actually works. I confess I may devalue electoral politics because when I first came to live in Thailand as a Peace Corps Volunteer, Thai political parties and elections did not matter very much. I still believe they do not matter very much. I came to Thailand as an agent of American imperialism - this was "soft" imperialism that went hand-in-hand with the harder forms of imperialism being conducted by the American government during the Cold War. When I first arrived in Thailand in September 1963, F. M. Sarit Thanarat was prime minister. Technically, I was an employee of Sarit's government, and after he died in December 1963 and Thanom and Prapat took over, I was still employed by a military dictatorship. Elections and political parties didn't matter then, and I guess I think they still don't matter very much.

I have two points to make in this talk.

1) First, I think we have to understand the Thai state better. In my opinion, analysts and academics do not describe the Thai state accurately. The state is not a monolithic thing, it has many parts, many autonomous units that sometimes act without proper authority, and we need a better model / concept / paradigm for understanding the Thai state - what it is, who acts for the Thai state, who or what acts with the assistance of the state, and how the different parts interact with each other. Thai political scientists in particular like to talk about "the state" (รัฐ) and how powerful it is. I think this is an illusion. The State is not all powerful. I'll come back to this point later in my talk.

2) The second point has to do with Thailand's neighbours in mainland Southeast Asia. I want to step away from Thailand for a moment and look at the country as belonging to a set of countries that are historically linked, with political systems that have a lot in common. Siam / Thailand was not colonised directly, but it borrowed many features of the colonial state and made use of colonial officials in its reforms beginning in the 1890s. During the demonstrations and violence last year, the occasional comparison was made between Thailand and military rule in Myanmar, but otherwise, there was very little comment on Thailand's place among its mainland neighbours. The public debate and internet commentary was very inward-looking. Given the large demonstrations and the occupation of Ratchaprasong, it is understandable why public interest was focused on Thai politics. But there is a regional dimension that helps explain Thailand's awkward dance with democracy over

the decades.

Since decolonization after the Second World War, democracy has been a problem in mainland Southeast Asia - I am speaking about all Southeast Asian countries except Indonesia and the Philippines. Governments voted into office in the region are usually one-party governments. Authoritarian governments like elections, because leaders can then tell the world they have come to power through the electoral process. The distinction between elections and democracy is often not made. There is a big difference between elections and democracy. Elections do not automatically give us democracy. If elections are not free and competitive, participatory democracy is impossible. Vote-buying - candidates handing out cash and other inducements to voters - is a recurrent issue, leading to the widespread belief that elections are fixed. There is another problem. The political culture in a participatory democracy needs to be tolerant of dissent. By contrast, in Southeast Asia, those in the region already in power strive to limit dissent and manipulate democracy to ensure their longevity in office. Sometimes they manage to ensure permanency of rule. This is certainly what motivated Police Lieutenant Colonel Thaksin Shinawatra when he was prime minister and ran his party like a cartel. He wanted to stay in power as long as he could.

To understand this point more clearly, let us look across the mainland. In Myanmar, the army has governed for nearly fifty years, since 1962. There have been two very strong leaders since independence: General Ne Win and General Than Shwe. General Than Shwe, who seems to have stepped back from day-to-day managing, is known as the Great Protector and Unifier. There were elections last year and there is some evidence of military dictatorship easing. Aung San Suu Kyi has been released from house arrest, but her movements are circumscribed. She herself exhibits some autocratic tendencies - she refused to let the NLD participate in the elections last year, and she continues to insist that sanctions remain in place, even though many analysts and activists believe the sanctions are hurting rather than helping the situation. In any case, even though the army has relaxed its controls ever so slightly, some kind of military rule seems inevitable in Myanmar even on the most distant horizon.

In Cambodia, a strongman is still in power decades after he was installed as prime minister by the Vietnamese during their military occupation of the country. Hun Sen is a former member of the Khmer Rouge. Since Cambodia re-established its sovereignty in 1993, Hun Sen has been the leading figure in the ruling coalition of the Cambodian People's Party and the royalist party (FUNCINPEC). They have elections in Cambodia, but Hun Sen has been prime minister - with a few interruptions - since 1985. This is autocratic government. There is stability, but there is no evidence of a succession plan.

Laos has been a single-party socialist republic since December 1975. In fact, the only legal party is the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, which is the ruling party. The government is run by a small politburo and a larger Central Committee of 49 members. There were elections in 1992 for a new 85-member National Assembly and again in 2006 when the membership was expanded to 115. The National Assembly elects new leaders every five years, and in June it re-elected the General Secretary of the Lao's People's Revolutionary Party. So, there is a succession plan for government leadership, although re-election is possible. So, like Cambodia, there is stability, but unlike Cambodia, there is a regular succession plan for the head of government who comes from the single party that rules.

Like Laos, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam is also a one-party state. According to the new constitution of 1992 that replaced the 1975 constitution, the Communist Party of Vietnam has a firm hold on government and politics. Only political organisations affiliated with the CPV are allowed to field candidates in national elections. The National Assembly has 498 members. The last elections were in 2007, and there are some non-party members in the Assembly. Again, we have rule by one

party.

In Malaysia, there is more multi-party activity, but the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the dominant party in ruling coalitions since independence, alters the constitution in its favour and regularly rearranges electorates to preserve its electoral advantage. The protests and public disturbances a few weeks ago in early July were aimed at UMNO and the umbrella coalition, Barisan Nasional and the stranglehold they have on Malay politics. The coalition and its predecessor have governed Malaysia since independence. Denying participatory democracy seems to have been an UMNO policy. Last October Mahathir Mohamad, who was Malaysia's prime minister for 22 years, gave a speech stating that democracy has failed in many countries and authoritarian rule might be the answer. He practiced what he preaches. Malaysia has had autocratic rule by a single party for nearly half a century.

When I teach a history course on mainland Southeast Asia, I don't usually include Singapore in the survey, but let's include it here as another good example of one-party dominance. We might describe Singapore's political system as non-communist socialism. In Singapore the People's Action Party has won every election since independence in 1959 and, naturally, has governed since then. If other parties exhibit meaningful opposition, the PAP hobbles them and thus maintains its one-party dominance. Opposition parliamentarians who show promise of strong and popular leadership are sometimes ruined financially by being sued. The interesting lesson from this comparison with Singapore is that the Lee family has played a key role in the continuing one-party dominance of the PAP.

By the way, in the Singapore national election in 2006, 300,000 older and lower income voters received about S\$500 in their bank accounts just before the election, and they received the same amount again a year later in 2007. There is no outcry about vote-buying in Singapore. These grants advanced the prospects of the PAP and helped to ensure its permanency of rule, but no one calls these grants "vote-buying." It seems vote buying happens only in Thailand.

So, what do we see? Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and Singapore are all one-party states and have been governed by this party since the end of colonial rule. They all have relatively stable governments; in Laos and Vietnam regular succession procedures assure the re-election or re-appointment of leaders from a controlled pool of candidates. In Singapore something similar happens, with the preeminence - and domination - of the Lee family playing a large role. In Burma and Cambodia, we seem to have something more like the rule of a single strongman over a period of time. What about political violence? In recent years, if we limit the comparison to only mass incidents with serious loss of life, only Myanmar in 1988 (fatalities about 3,200 in March and August) and 2009 (fatalities about 138). Malaysia had race riots in 1969 (death toll less than 200).

Up to this point in my argument, what do I conclude? I see mainland Southeast Asia as a region of autocratic political systems where governments are dominated by a single party - military, socialist, communist, ethnic. Singapore and Malaysia are not exceptions. This region of autocratic political systems is the immediate neighbourhood in which Thai democracy is expected to put down its roots and flourish. What chance does Thailand to grow a participatory democracy in this neighbourhood? It's a very rough neighbourhood - maybe there is not a lot of overt political violence, but there are a lot of tough guys - soldiers and police with guns - to repress dissent. Administrators have served in the armed forces; soldiers are trained as administrators, and not just warriors. I conclude that Thailand is not exceptional in this neighbourhood. Thailand is comfortable in this neighbourhood, and Thailand is a friendly neighbour to the countries around it. Thailand's political system belongs in a regional political field with systemic features that favour autocratic rule. By autocratic rule, I do not mean rule by a single strongman, although that has happened from time to time. Rule can be through a single party (Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia), a single party dominated by a family (Singapore),

a single party dominating a coalition (Malaysia).

We could ask why? Why is autocratic rule so firmly embedded in mainland Southeast Asia in the period following independence after the Second World War?

I can think of two reasons. One reason is that all these countries in their pre-modern histories had absolute monarchies, and these monarchies did not tolerate, in fact they could not tolerate, a loyal opposition. In an absolute monarchy, to be in opposition is to be in rebellion against sovereign authority. Colonialism wiped away the monarchies for the most part, certainly the absolute monarchies, but here and there we find a little monarchy left over in the postcolonial period: Cambodia; Malaysia; and of course Thailand, where the monarchy, with the aid of the military and the political astuteness of the monarch, demonstrated remarkable resilience and capacity to re-build itself from its dire circumstances in the mid-1930s and again in the late 1940s.

The second reason is that colonial regimes also did not tolerate, they could not tolerate, a loyal opposition. To be in opposition during a colonial regime was also to be in rebellion against sovereign authority. To put the matter another way, legally it is not possible to be in opposition. To oppose sovereign authority is to act illegally, to commit a crime. Hence, we have the security laws that make criticism of government and political dissent a crime. All these mainland countries inherited their internal security laws from the Western imperial powers that colonized them - in the case of Thailand, from the Pax Americana in Southeast Asia that lasted from the end of the Second World War until the early 1970s [1]. Colonial rule reinforced the monarchical tradition: anyone who took a stand against the government of the day is a rebel.

Nowadays, anyone who takes a stand against the government of the day is a rebel. In Thailand during the 1950s the main political dissenters were thought to be communists, communist sympathisers, and the police investigative unit responsible for suppressing this political dissent was the Santibal, the political police. We can translate Santibal literally as "Peace Force."

So where is Thailand? Does Thailand have autocratic rule now? We just had a national election, and now we (may) have an elected woman prime minister. The people spoken! Let me make one or two points about Thailand's political history and its political culture.

The combination of autocracy and democracy, or democracy and autocracy, runs deep in the Thai elite consciousness. A few days before the 1932 revolution and the end to the absolute monarchy, King Prajadhipok thought about granting a constitution, but all the while he clung to the hope that the Thai people could be encouraged to support the absolute monarchy. King Prajadhipok expressed it this way: "Our country uses a 'dictatorship' system of government, but our system is not like other 'dictator' systems. On the contrary, it has many characteristics of a 'democracy.' Thus it is a sort of half-and-half, and we haven't really decided which system we will follow." Thai and Western political scientists have written many thousands of words on "semi-democracy" in Thailand ever since that time. Indeed, "semi-democracy" (khruang bai or กึ่งประชาธิปไตย in Thai) would be a good summary of what King Prajadhipok was saying. As the decades have passed, there has not been much improvement. At this point it's more like "one quarter democracy," or even less. History and the passage of time have merely reversed the formulation, as if to say, "our country uses a democratic system of government, but it has many characteristics of dictatorship." The double-faced figure of the benevolent dictator or the enlightened despot still looms large in the minds of Thai political thinkers as they puzzle over the real significance of the 1932 event. I believe one of the reasons the so-called Thai revolution of 1932 is so badly studied and poorly understood is because the Enlightened Despot is still alive today in Thai political culture. The term detkhat (เด็ดขาด) is one of the keywords in Thai political culture. It is important for Thai leaders to be decisive, firm, "absolute."

Thai people have admired strong leaders since the 1930s when fascism was in vogue world-wide. Thai leaders looked to Mussolini's fascism because of its anti-communist ideology. The term was used approvingly in the Bangkok press in the late 1920s and early 1930s. A Thai biography of Mussolini was published in that fateful year 1932. But it was not the ideology of fascism that Thai political leaders really admired. It was the personal style of the strongman, or a softer variant marked by heroic leadership, that attracted Thai leaders and political thinkers. World leaders such as Eamon DeValera, Josef Stalin, Adolf Hitler, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Chiang Kai-shek, Mao Zedong, and Zhou Enlai also commanded attention, a seemingly bizarre list of nationalists, communists and pacifists as well as fascists. Luang Wichit Watthakan wrote about these men with great admiration. In his *Strategies for Creating Greatness*, published in 1952, the list of exemplary figures included several heroic women - Florence Nightingale, Sarah Bernhardt, and Helen Keller. Luang Wichit wrote many articles and books in this genre of success literature and showed why such people should be admired for their strength of mind, powers of concentration, self-confidence, and will power.

This admiration for strong-willed people who could shake the world with their words and actions was a phenomenon observable everywhere, not just in Thailand. When Sidney Hook praised "event-making men" in his *The Hero in History* first published in 1943, he identified a leadership ideal that had currency in many parts of the world, including Southeast Asia. This ideal of the event-making man has had a very long half-life in Thailand. During the political protests in March-April-May 2010 a journalist in a Chiang Mai saw portraits of Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, and Che Guevara. Next to them was Police Lieutenant Colonel Thaksin Shinawatra! While these men have power over others, this line-up of famous world leaders suggests that it is an amoral power to be admired no matter what ideologies these people stand for. These famous people have something in common. In addition to amoral power, they have that strange, alchemic compound we call in English charisma that makes them a natural leader.

Looking at the socio-political landscape in Southeast Asia more broadly, I do not think that fascism helps us to understand militaristic leadership in Thailand. Instead, the personal style of leadership that some observers want to label fascist is better understood in other terms. Strong leadership, if necessary strong leadership armed with tanks and guns, is admired as much as it is resented in Thailand, and there is a definite Buddhist element in this leadership style. The strongman, with or without a background in the military or security services, is sometimes of ascetic demeanour, and much admired for his personal discipline and powers of self-control. Several prime ministers, and some would-be prime ministers, fit this description. The Thailand-based columnist "Chang Noi" has described this variant of leadership as an amalgam of monk and gangster, the ascetic and the strongman in the one individual—always, of course, male. The current chairman of the Thailand's Privy Council, General Prem Tinsulanonda, was mentioned as a case in point. Major General Chamlong Srimuang, a core leader of the Yellow Shirts, is another.

It is helpful to understand this type of personalised leadership by drawing on the concept of "big men" familiar in other parts of the world, including the Pacific nation-states. In Southeast Asian political cultures the "big man" is called the "man of prowess." The "big man" rested his claim to authority on performance, not on lineage. In pre-modern Southeast Asian kingdoms there was no law of primogeniture. Usurpations happened often, with half-brothers in these polygamous societies eager to advance their claims to the throne on the basis of paternity and maternal lines that strengthened those claims. The man of prowess rewarded supporters with land grants or suzerainty over subjugated populations. He was generous with these rewards, and ruthless in excluding latecomers who had dallied in declaring their loyalty. Like the big men of Melanesia, rulers widened their spheres of influence and created supra-local networks by means of generosity calculated to attract loyal supporters. They redistributed bounty acquired by trade or plunder to their personal

retinues or entourages. In today's world, instead of talking about trade or plunder, think of "business dealings." Instead of talking about personal retinues or entourages, think of "political parties." This tradition helps to account for the practice today of building political constituencies by buying votes in national elections. In this way rulers accumulated social capital and extended their hegemony. "Redistributing bounty" can be understood in the government of Police Lieutenant Colonel Thaksin Shinawatra as the 30 baht health scheme and a million baht for every village. In other words, the 30 baht health scheme and the million baht per village is not so much a policy of the government as the redistribution of largesse to build political constituencies.

The "big men" may dominate for a time, but everywhere there are "little big men" wanting to take their places. These "little big men" strive to increase their own prowess in competition with one other. Ultimately they want to challenge the "big man" who had already achieved success. In the late colonial period in Mainland Southeast Asia, revolts were led by "little big men." In Thai we call these figures *phu mi bun* (บุญมีบุญ or men of merit). These holy men revolts were early forms of redistributive populisms led by men of prowess who had been pushed to one side by the colonising state, either Western (Laos, Cambodia, Burma) or indigenous (Thailand). Charms, amulets, and a reputation for supernatural powers helped to attract and mobilise supporters. In modern times in Thailand, the man of prowess may be a high-ranking general who has risen through the ranks, become prime minister, and served the monarchy with distinction. Or he may be a successful businessman who has made a fortune selling telecommunications equipment to the security services. Whatever the modality of its transformation in the modern age, autocratic rule in Thailand today has its roots in an earlier form of a political economy of leadership. This earlier form valorised a man who could be both generous and ruthless. He would reward his supporters and punish his rivals and competitors *pen detkhat*. The enduring popularity of this kind of leadership in the region should never be underestimated. It is very much present in the region today.

If this kind of leadership is the norm in the region, what are the implications for understanding the state? So I want to return now to the first point I mentioned above - the need to understand the Thai state. What is the Thai state? What is it really like? If we could visualise it, what would it look like? Who acts for the Thai state? Who or what acts with the assistance of the state? How do the different parts interact with each other? Is the prime minister at the centre? Is the king at the centre - he is, after all, the head of state?

The structure of the Thai government , simplified.

Forget the structure of government, forget the legislative body, parliament, the prime minister, the judiciary. Think of the Thai state as an entangled mass of interlocking relationships, alliances, and struggles between and among many centres of power often in competition with one another. Imagine further a jungle gym such as you find in playgrounds where the links are made of flexible braided cables instead of rope and are joined together at connection points. These points where the cables connect are nodes of power: institutions such as the parliament, the police force with its many factions, the army with its many factions, and the office of prime minister; business conglomerates; units of the bureaucracy, such as the Ministry of the Interior or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or sub-units of these and other departments; and the palace(s). Each of these connection points or nodes of power can have a great deal of autonomy, can in fact operate without being told or asked to do something. A scholarly literature on "governmental nodes" and their variety shows that this concept of state is widespread in the world today. There are forms of governmental activity outside of the state and pluralisation and autonomy that is not planned or anticipated or authorised.

Everyone here aspires to proximity to power, wherever it may be located, and access to profit. It is important for people who aspire to power and profit to be flexible and able to change direction

quickly as conditions change. This is why an entrepreneurial spirit is highly valued in the Thai state; people need to respond immediately to changed circumstances, just like a business needs to be flexible and respond quickly to changes in the economy or the markets. Indeed, many of the nodes of power function like business enterprises – Thaksin Inc., First Army Inc., General Chavalit Yongchaiyut Inc., and so forth. At the same time, apprehension of how others will react at other connection points is a check on bold action and may slow decisions. There are certain features of the system that deliberately slow things down. It is important to be flexible and adaptable, but is also necessary to be cautious, wary, and resilient. To mix the metaphor further, the connection points / nodes of power are organic – they can reproduce themselves. The royal family / supreme institution is not the only node capable of reproduction at all costs; the army, the police force, business corporations with strong links to nodes of power can also reproduce themselves.

How do the nodes or connection points connect? What runs back and forth and along the conduits and strands of cable between and among the connection points? Here are some examples of what moves along the conduits and cable strands connection the governmental nodes.

- Things, especially of a material kind. Donations and gifts (from above to below and below to above); handouts, payments, fees, bribes, material incentives to get things done.
- Information and “intelligence” of a political, economic, and security- related nature, secrets, discreet disclosures, alerts and hints – sometimes true, sometimes misleading – of impending developments, opportunities foreshadowed, and not only commercial opportunities. Knowledge of all kinds. Rumours are said to be the knowledge of the powerless, but in this state, rumours are necessary to the movement of things between the nodes.
- Orders and demands, urgent requests that require quick decisions, supplications, credits and debts for favours bestowed, obligations, agreements, understandings formal and informal, contracts. Paperwork is sometimes required, but sometimes only a telephone call is necessary to get the job done.
- Conversely, whatever is moving between connection points may encounter resistance, aggravation, impedance, obstruction, or outright rejection. Jealousy and mistrust motivate action. Disinformation and dissension can preserve the integrity of the relationships.
- Relationships between the nodes may be by blood or marriage; or lifetime ties based on school, university, academy class or army unit cohorts; friendships, comradeships and loyalties forged in all walks of life and work; ties of reciprocity and mutual assistance that flow from these connections.
- The concentration of power at the nodes will differ markedly in each historical moment. The dynamism and movement across the CJG enable the Thai state to right itself if there is too much tension or conflict, or if power becomes too concentrated as it did in 2005-2006 leading up to the military coup of September 2006. The analysis here is reminiscent of structural-functional models and systems theory that were discarded a long time ago by theorists of the modern state. For our purposes here, it is useful to bring the structural-functional model.

The coups of February 1991 and 2006 coups surprised all observers. By their own admission, journalists, academics, including Thai academics, and security analysts were caught napping. This failure of intelligence occurred for a reason. The CJG / Thai state cannot be properly discerned with the language currently being used to describe it. The spectacles through which we view the Thai state need new lenses. At the moment things we see things out of focus and everything is blurred.

This picture of the Thai state offers a more realistic understanding of how things actually work. One

