Civil-military relations in a pseudo-democratic state
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The case of Thailand
Paul Chambers

The military in Thailand is a pivotal political actor in a country that has experienced at least 34 successful, attempted, or quiet coups since 1932. Following Thailand’s latest coup in 2014, the country was once again directly ruled by the military. Then in 2019, the junta held an election that a junta-created political party, Palang Pracharat, won under irregular circumstances, which led to the formation of a coalition government under the 2014–2019 junta leader, General (Gen.) Prayuth Chan-ocha. In effect, the July 2019 election, which Gen. Prayuth won, allowed the previous junta to prolong its rule by different means. In 2020, in reaction to the coronavirus pandemic, the government declared a state of emergency and enhanced its authoritarian measures.

Today, with few, if any, civilian authorities to constrain its power, one would think that the Thai military has enhanced its effectiveness. Such an assumption is based on the notion that a military knows best how to build effectiveness for itself. Indeed, the effectiveness of militaries that can exert with carte blanche power is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, Thailand’s military has been able to formulate and implement defense planning, create and sustain defense structures, and utilize almost any resources it needs to accomplish its preferred political and security outcomes. On the other hand, the complete dearth of democratic civilian control has led to abuses of power by the Thai military. In turn, these abuses have hindered innovative changes in military bureaucracy while allowing for lack of budgetary oversight and increases in military impunity, malfeasance, cronyism, and factionalism.

This chapter examines the tradeoff between democratic civilian control and effectiveness of the armed forces in Thailand. It argues that the effectiveness of militaries completely unchecked by democratic civilian control—as in the case of Thailand—is negatively affected as far as fulfilling the roles and missions defined in Chapter 1 of this book. This chapter first examines Thailand’s historical trajectory of civil-military relations and follows that with a review of the current pattern of civilian-military relations (including an examination of the current roles and missions of the military).

Background of civil-military relations in Thailand prior to 2014

Thailand’s civil-military relations have traditionally been characterized by the armed forces exerting tremendous administrative and political power—whether as the mechanism of absolute kings, enjoying absolute power for themselves, or as the monarchy’s junior partner. Before 1932, Thailand was ruled by an absolute monarchy guarded by a military crucial to enforcing arch-royalist internal security. In 1932, a joint military/civilian grouping staged a coup d’état, forcing an end to monarchical absolutism. From
1933 until 1938, Thailand was a pseudodemocracy. Then from 1938 to 1944, the country fell under the military dictatorship of Field Marshal Phibunsongkhram. At this time, a back-and-forth rivalry between army power and police power commenced. Though elected civilian control first appeared in Thailand in 1946, it was quickly overthrown in 1947 by a military coup endorsed by the palace.²

The 1950s witnessed the increasing rise of police power as the army tried to defend its clout. In 1957, the army chief, Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, usurped power by using repression and collaboration with the monarchy to consolidate and then bolster his rule.³ Sarit brought the police under army control. In 1973, an intensifying monarchical and public disenchantment, as well as a growing military factionalism, forced the junta leaders of the Thanarat government into exile.⁴ The result was elected civilian rule in 1975; however, a year later in 1976, the military carried out another coup.

In 1980, arch-royalist Gen. Prem Tinsulanonda was appointed premier and served until 1988 alongside a military-appointed Senate.⁵ The year 1988 also saw King Rama IX (Bhumibol Adulyadej) promote Gen. Prem to his Privy Council (the monarch’s advisory board) and the ascension of elected Premier Chatchai Choonhavan, though the Senate remained under the control of the military. Friction between this premier and Army Commander Gen. Suchinda Kraprayoon led to a 1991 coup. Suchinda himself tried to stay in power through elections as premier. However, civilian protests against him erupted in 1992, which led to a military massacre of demonstrators, and the king forced Suchinda to resign.⁶

A new election in September 1992 began Thailand’s longest period of elected civilian rule, an era that witnessed six consecutive elections, four premiers, and the enactment of the progressive 1997 constitution. Among other things, the constitution mandated the establishment of a fully elected Senate to correspond to the elected Lower House. During this period, following the preferences of the palace and the Privy Council (still dominated by Gen. Prem), the army leadership directed the military to undergo security sector reforms aimed at promoting accountability while also restructuring (downsizing and streamlining) it to improve effectiveness.⁷ Prem’s Privy Council backed elected civilian control in Thailand rather than military rule, if only to keep potential military adventurism against the palace at bay. Prem’s behind-the-scenes influence led to his being dubbed the “surrogate strongman of Thai politics” after 1992.⁸

In 2001, tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra won the general election by a landslide, and the government he formed lasted an entire term—the first civilian-led government to achieve this feat. He was re-elected in 2005. Thaksin was able to carve out a loyal faction within the Thai military while dominating the Thai police; he had served in the police from 1973 to 1987.⁹ Thaksin revived police clout vis-à-vis the army though the latter remained more powerful than the former. Thaksin even maneuvered his cousin, Chaiyasit Shinawatra, into becoming army chief.¹⁰ He also managed to gain direct control over military budgeting decisions. Ultimately, Thaksin was able to personalize civilian control over Thailand’s armed forces.

In September 2006, at the behest of Gen. Prem and the palace, the military ousted Thaksin from power; Thaksin was accused of corruption and abuse of power.¹¹ The junta-appointed regime oversaw the enactment of the 2007 constitution, which modified the Senate to become a body half-elected by the people and half-appointed by the junta. In the Senate at the time, 9.3 percent of the appointees were retired military officials.¹² The junta also placed the military’s decisions regarding yearly military appointments, which previously fell under the purview of the prime minister, under the complete control...
of senior generals alone. The regime allowed elections in December 2007, though the military sought to influence the outcome. One purported military plan involved using state-run media to attack and discredit the pro-Thaksin People’s Power Party (PPP) in the name of national security.13

Another supposed plot entailed the military lobbying political parties in a bid to prevent the PPP from forming a government after the election.14 Nevertheless, Thaksin’s PPP, officially led by Thaksin’s ally Samak Sundaravej, won the election. Yet upon Samak’s inauguration, the palace, Privy Council, and military leadership became increasingly determined to oust the government. When Samak tried to authorize the military to clear the streets of anti-government protestors, the military refused to carry out Samak’s order.15 Similarly, the army commander urged Samak’s successor, Somchai Wongsawat, to resign. In December 2008, the Constitutional Court ruled to dissolve the PPP, which caused the Somchai administration to collapse (though no new parliamentary election occurred). Thereupon, the palace and military officers used their influence to cobble together an anti-Thaksin parliamentary government headed by the arch-royalist Abhisit Vejachaiwi of the Democrat party.16 A triumvirate of pro-Prem soldiers was instrumental in this indirect military intervention: Army Chief Gen. Anupong Paochinda, retired Gen. Prawit Wongsuwan, and Anupong’s deputy, Gen. Prayuth Chan-ocha.

After 2006, the armed forces enjoyed total control over national security policy, border policy, and aspects of military organization, such as autonomy in making military appointments and greater independence in military budgeting. Moreover, the armed forces enjoyed greater impunity from civilian monitoring agencies.17 Under the non-elected 2008–2011 government, led by arch-royalist Abhisit, the military gained even more enhanced power. In addition, the triumvirate acquired key positions in the Abhisit government: Prawit became defense minister, Anupong remained army commander, and Prayuth was his deputy (Prayuth succeeded Anupong in 2010 as army commander). In April 2009, the military dispersed pro-Thaksin (so-called Red Shirt) demonstrations, who were protesting the elites’ role in bringing Abhisit to office. However, in March 2010, even larger Red Shirt protests commenced. On May 19, 2010, the army repressed the protestors and left more than 90 dead and more than 2000 injured.18 In the July 2011 general election, the pro-Thaksin Puea Thai Party won a landslide victory, and Thaksin’s sister Yingluck Shinawatra became premier (Thailand’s first female premier).

Initially, Yingluck’s 2011–2014 government followed a policy of appeasing the armed forces. Thus, during the 2011 military reshuffle of officers to higher ranks, Yingluck agreed to almost every appointment favored by Army Commander Prayuth.19 However, by 2013, increasingly suspicious of the military, Yingluck came to rely on the police to provide security for her government against anti-Shinawatra demonstrators.20

In October 2013, however, large anti-government demonstrations (aimed at removing the Yingluck government from office because of its perceived corruption and ties to Thaksin) rapidly grew in Bangkok. According to protest leader, Suthep Thaugsuban, he (Suthep) and Prayuth colluded to oust pro-Thaksin governments since 2010.21 Prayuth, who had stated at the initial stages of the protests that the military would remain neutral, slowly changed his position on the matter. In March 2014, he proclaimed, “I can’t promise if there will be another coup or not...but every coup is meant to end a crisis.”22 On May 20, after demonstrations had persisted for half a year, Prayuth declared martial law under the authority of the 1914 Martial Law Act. This step was tantamount to a coup because it gave the Army Commander Prayuth total control over Thailand.23
Deciphering the post-2014 pattern of civil-military relations

On May 22, 2014, saying “Sorry, I must seize power,” Prayuth ousted the elected civilian government in Thailand’s 30th overt military coup since 1932. Prayuth and supporters thereupon established a junta called the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) to administer Thailand. From the 2014 putsch until a 2019 military-manipulated election, the armed forces exercised absolute control over civilians. By absolute control, the army commander (empowered by the junta chief) could deny civilians of any rights as she/he saw fit and could issue any command effecting civilian matters, with the royal family alone not subject to these orders.

To rationalize its coup, the new junta leadership issued a series of official reasons, including the need to safeguard the monarchy, to help “the country…return to normality quickly…for society to love and be at peace again,” to “push through political reform,” and to “stop violence.” Unspoken but likely additional rationales for the coup were to 1) ensure arch-royalist order amid an impending royal succession; 2) re-assert monarchical-military domination over Thailand; 3) consolidate the domination over the armed forces and police by the leading army faction; 4) force the pro-Thaksin Puea Thai party (the successor party of the PPP) from office; and 5) enhance military corporate interests. The perseverance of military rule from 2014 until 2019 was due to three factors. First, Thailand’s popular, late King Rama IX endorsed the 2014 coup and the establishment of military rule, which gave the junta legitimacy. Second, since 2006, Thai civilians have been split regarding Thaksin Shinawatra, although the military has remained fairly united with mostly the senior brass opposed to Thaksin. Third, the military has shown itself willing to use repression on a broad scale to maintain power.

The junta’s structure of administration involved four military-dominant institutions. First, there was the NCPO itself, led by Prayuth, 13 other security officers, and four civilians. Second, there was the Prayuth-led cabinet, which in 2017 included (active-duty or retired) military and police occupying 14 out of 47 posts. Third, there was the National Legislative Assembly, which in 2017 was comprised of 250 members, 158 of which were military and police (active-duty or retired). Fourth was the now-defunct National Reform Steering Assembly, tasked to design a new constitution; the assembly was comprised of 80 military officers and 120 civilians. The military officers on these last two bodies conspicuously blocked any attempts to expand civilian authority in the constitution while helping to enshrine the junta’s and military’s interests.

Through the NCPO, the military initially exerted power over civilians using the Martial Law Act of 1914. However, in July 2014, the junta enacted an interim constitution, which enshrined the junta’s powers on a massive scale. In this document, Section 44 stated that whenever the junta leader believed it necessary to deal with “any act,” he could issue “any order…regardless of the legislative, executive or judicial force of that order.” Such an order would be considered “legal, constitutional and conclusive.”

In Thailand, military courts now prevail over civilian courts in terms of legal jurisprudence. Procedures in these courts tend to be longer than regular court proceedings, they mostly lack transparency, and the judges are all military officers answerable to the NCPO alone. Cases in these courts specifically relate to national security, lèse-majesté (insults to monarchy), sedition, and violations of the junta’s ban on speech and public assembly. These courts hand down penalties involving long prison sentences. Indeed, a single violation of Thailand’s lèse-majesté law can lead to a 15-year prison term.

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To stifle anti-junta dissent quickly, only days after the May 22, 2014 coup, the NCPO created the Peace Maintaining Force (PMF). The PMF arrested any person who, following a summons, defied the junta’s orders to surrender to the military. The PMF also implemented “attitude adjustment” detentions involving arrests, often without charge, with those detained forbidden access to attorneys. The very term “attitude adjustment” has become notoriously fearful in official circulation among Thailand’s population. There have occasionally been allegations of military torture associated with these detentions.

By 2016, more than 1,006 people had been summoned for attitude adjustment. Also, the NCPO has terminated administrative and political decentralization. Under the NCPO, all provincial, city, and subdistrict elected officials (including those in Bangkok) have been replaced with appointed officials who are civilian (or retired military) cronies of the junta. To forestall potential protests, the NCPO decreed Article 12 of Order No. 3/2015, which forbids gatherings of more than four people, with punishments up to six months in prison. By 2016, these orders had quashed 130 academic discussions and public civil society gatherings. In 2015, the National Legislative Assembly (the junta’s appointed rubber-stamp legislature) adopted the Public Assembly Act, which bans demonstrations within 150 meters of royal places or inside parts of Government House, Parliament, courthouses, and it forbids “disturbances” close to any public venue.

Moreover, the NCPO has actively practiced media censorship. Besides vigorously prosecuting the lèse-majesté law, the junta has issued two additional decrees. Article 103/2014 prohibits the revelation of information that might discredit the coup-makers. In addition, Order No. 41/2016 empowers the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission to shutter any telecommunications media deemed to have failed to cooperate with the NCPO or presenting information seen as a threat to “national security.” For example, in April 2015, the junta forced the television station “Peace TV” (seen as subversive by both the junta and military) off the air permanently.

Even though the NCPO had promised a general election and return to democracy in 2019 (and a general election did take place on March 24, 2019), the structure of the new political system has allowed the military to remain insulated from civilian control. First, beginning in 2019, the Senate became a fully appointed body (from being half-elected and half-appointed before the 2014 putsch) with members selected by a junta-created committee for five-year terms and also include the six most senior military officials. The Senate can participate with the elected Lower House in selecting a prime minister, and any amendments to the constitution required the assent of at least one-third of senators.

Second, prior to a general election, each political party nominates three names, which could include unelected persons. This potentially allows junta leaders or ex-military personnel to become premier. Third, through a new military-dominated National Strategy Committee overseeing the National 20-Year Strategy, junta and military leaders can advance their policy preferences and remain influential across Thailand’s future democracy. Elected and unelected officials have to adhere to the strategy or risk removal by the judiciary. Other military domains of control include power over military reshuffles without civilian interference, more military supremacy over military budgeting, and control over civilians in internal security operation zones.

**Post-2014 roles and missions of the military**

Today, Thailand’s principal security actors are the Royal Thai Armed Forces (i.e., the Royal Thai Army, the Royal Thai Navy, and the Royal Thai Air Force), the Royal Thai...
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Police, and three principal paramilitary forces: the Rangers, the Border Patrol Police, and Volunteer Defense Corps. With at least 210,000 personnel, the army has been the most powerful security actor in terms of size and budgetary allocation in comparison to the Royal Thai Air Force, Royal Thai Navy, and the Royal Thai Police. Above the army, air force, and navy is the mostly ornamental Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters. Its commander works primarily to coordinate the three services. The Royal Thai Police (with 230,000 personnel) possesses a smaller budget and less security hardware than the army. In 2019, Globalfirepower.com estimated that altogether Thailand possessed 605,000 military personnel (active-duty and reserved). Globalfirepower.com also ranked Thailand as 26th best out of 137 in its 2019 military strength ranking.

According to Bruneau and Matei, globally, the six major roles and missions of security forces are

1) fight, and be prepared to fight, external wars; 2) fight, and be prepared to fight, internal wars or insurgencies; 3) fight global terrorism; 4) fight crime; 5) provide support for humanitarian assistance; and 6) prepare for and execute peace support operations.

Nevertheless, the primary missions and objectives of Thailand’s armed forces have traditionally differed from those of militaries in most other countries. For one thing, the Thai military places guarding the monarchy as its foremost purpose. The second mission rationalizes domestic military involvement in safeguarding the country from a wide range of threats. The third mission gives the military a supporting role to the government, which as of 2014 has been the NCPO junta. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Defense’s missions and roles are similar to those of the armed forces. For example, like the armed forces, it views protection of the monarchy as its “paramount mission.”

Since the 2014 coup, the Thai armed forces have had four actual objectives. The first is still first and foremost to protect and obey the monarchy (given that the palace is the most powerful institution in Thailand). The second is to undergird the NCPO junta’s authoritarian rule, and the third is to engender popular support for the military by the Thai populace through a bevy of diluted populist programs, discounts, and forms of entertainment. Finally, the fourth is to defeat insurgency in Thailand’s far southern borderlands. This hierarchy of objectives is owed to two historically entrenched factors. The first is the continuing dominance of the monarch across Thai politics and society, and the second is the persistent clout of the armed forces itself over Thailand as a sort of junior partner to the king. Like the armed forces, since 2014, the Ministry of Defense has acted as an arch-royalist mechanism of the junta given one of the ministry’s primary roles is to “support… NCPO guidelines [by] controlling illegal activities in conjunction with propagating social awareness, for example, to help defuse student violent behaviors and aggressive acts.”

Military effectiveness without civilian control

The monarchy-endorsed 2014 coup voided all checks on the military by elected civilians as well as efforts to achieve civilian control over the military. Without civilian restraint of the military, the country has witnessed the legal enshrinement of enhanced military powers, which has boosted military effectiveness in terms of the ability of the military as an organization to achieve preferred policy outcomes through the use of defense planning, structures, and available resources. Yet the end of civilian rule and monitoring
has also impinged upon the military’s effectiveness by preventing innovative changes in military bureaucracy while at the same time allowing an increase in military impunity, malfeasance, croniesm, and factionalism and an unrestrained budget.

With regard to defense planning under NCPO guidelines, junta leaders have embarked on a vast military modernization program designed to enhance wide-ranging military readiness and capabilities, improve its administrative processes, and strengthen its management structures to more effectively confront threats to the kingdom, specifically in terms of internal security issues and border protection. The policy involves two interlinked plans. The first is the Modernization Plan: Vision 2026, which outlines expected improvements in the Thai military for the next ten years, and the second is the Defense Industry Masterplan (2015–2020), intended to assist defense-related industries achieve greater self-reliance in weapons production and more fully cooperate with a diversified grouping of foreign military suppliers. Other new policies include plans to establish new military centers, to upgrade military reserve forces, and to combat corruption in the military. All plans fall under the jurisdiction of the National Defense Strategic Plan (2017–2036), which mandates an incrementally strengthened Thai military and a greater role for Thai defense forces in regional security. In turn, this latter plan is closely connected to the National Strategic Development Plan (2017–2036), which is guided by a military-dominated committee monitoring compliance with the plan by all future governments that are required to adhere to the plan or risk impeachment and imprisonment.

Meanwhile, Thai military effectiveness is upheld by structures and processes to formulate and implement its defense plans. Four institutions are tasked with protecting Thai national security: the Ministry of Defense, the Royal Thai Armed Forces (RTARF), the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC), and the National Security Council. Prior to the 2014 coup, civilian control over the Defense Ministry and the National Security Council was supposed to help monitor the military. However, the RTARF has generally succeeded in remaining insulated from civilian control because the military-dominated Defense Council and Council of Armed Forces Commanders could each “block or delay the decisions of the minister of defense” as well as those of the National Security Agency. Since the 2014 coup, all national security institutions are controlled by the NCPO junta, a situation that has facilitated interagency coordination. Junta leader Premier Prayuth Chan-ocha is also the director of ISOC. The junta’s deputy chairperson and Deputy Premier, Prawit Wongsuwan, is concurrently defense minister. Air Chief Marshal Wallop Raksanor, a Prawit confidante who previously worked in the Defense Ministry, serves as secretary-general of the National Security Council. Junta decrees (as well as Section 44 of the 2014 constitution) have the power to override any pre-existing law except for those dealing with the monarchy.

Finally, the military has shored up its political, educational, and financial resources to improve military effectiveness. Armed forces leaders have built up positive political capital with the monarchy since 1980. Such arch-royalism has assisted the military to locate allies among Thailand’s conservative, urban upper, and middle classes. Under the reign of King Rama X (2016 to the present), the military, acting as its agent, has continued to work closely with the palace, which boosts the military’s legitimacy with the people. Also, the military possesses educational resources, including several military education institutions, including pre-cadet, army, navy, air force, and police academies, to spearhead the training of military personnel. Such training is supplemented by drills with foreign personnel. In 2017, the Thai military began the process of purchasing three Chinese submarines; in
conjunction, Chinese soldiers will be temporarily stationed in Thailand to teach the Thais how to operate the submarines.

As for financial resources, Thailand has annually increased military spending to improve military effectiveness since the 2006 coup. The Thai defense budget has spiraled from US$2.442 billion (85.93 billion Thai baht) in 2006 to US$7.6 billion (233.35 billion Thai baht) in 2020. Since the 2014 coup and until 2019, the defense budget (as a share of total government spending) has escalated from 6.4 percent to 7 percent. From 2014 to 2019, military expenditures grew from US$83.3 to US$105.1 per capita and from 2006 until 2020 it increased from 1.1 percent to 1.4 as a share of the gross domestic product. Junta leaders claim that the overall 15 years of more-or-less continuing defense budget increases (since 2005) are necessary for Thailand’s military to remain competitive with other nations, and these increases will be used to replace antiquated weapons.

Problems with lack of civilian rule

Although Thai military rule has encouraged some kind of military effectiveness, it has also deteriorated military effectiveness due to several factors. First, Thai military rule has guaranteed that change-resistant rules and routines in the military’s organizational culture have remained especially sacrosanct. This practice has weakened attempts at innovative, cost-cutting efficiency in military bureaucracy—efforts that mostly came from civilians before 2014. For example, the NCPO opposed a reduction in the excessive number of senior military officers, supported expensive procurements of nonessential hardware, and cancelled privatizations of state enterprises.

Second, military rule has increased the legal impunity of military officials. NCPO Order 13/2560 granted police powers to military officials. This order also allows soldiers to target civilians for crimes beyond simple violations of national security. Additionally, it has given military officials the authority to arrest, investigate, and detain anyone without any judicial or legislative oversight mechanism.

Third, the NCPO’s grip on power has hindered investigations into military malfeasance and conflicts of interest. Efforts to combat military corruption remain weak because cases are adjudicated inside the NCPO-dominated military. As exemplified by incidents that range from an expensive land sale by junta leader Prayuth, to his nephew’s winning a bid for a concession, to deputy junta leader Prawit’s failure to declare almost two dozen expensive watches, to Prawit’s brother’s unusual wealth, the judiciary has not dared to try to restrain military corruption.

Fourth, the junta’s control facilitates military cronyism. For example, the junta arrested a complainant requesting an investigation into the conduct of junta leaders Prayuth and Prawit for appointing their close relatives and associates into the junta-created National Reform Steering Assembly (NRSA). In fact, a large proportion of NCPO appointees to the cabinet, NRSA, and National Legislative Assembly have been pro-Prayuth or pro-Prawit military officials.

Fifth, NCPO authority has strengthened military factionalism. The NCPO leadership itself is dominated by the anti-Thaksin, ultra-royalist army clique, the “Eastern Tigers,” and its subfaction, the “Queen’s Tiger Guards.” The highest promotions have gone to members of these factions. Two other competitive factions, “Divine Progeny” and “Special Forces,” have received a lesser share of senior posts. The junta’s emphasis on factional concerns in awarding promotions has diminished military professionalism.
Finally, sixth, military rule has led to a pattern of growing defense budgeting, which appears unchecked amid cuts in non-defense budgets, such as a 4.7 percent cut in national education in 2017. Moreover, after the 2014 coup, junta leaders depleted the country’s treasury reserves by 85 percent. This sum did not include a 744.2-billion Thai baht loan, which the NCPO took out to compensate for deficits in 2015 and 2016.

Conclusion
The historical legacy of the deeply entrenched Thai armed forces’ influence on the government has ensured that the military remains a dominant societal influence through today. The goal of the Thai military increasingly revolves around guarding the king and his interests. However, the military’s roles and missions have escalated such that its every objective is an extension of the need to protect the monarchy—which places democracy and elected civilian rule as peripheral goals for the military. The post-2014 junta has improved military effectiveness because the military was able to increasingly enshrine its powers. However, this condition has proved to be a double-edged sword ultimately because it has also hindered military effectiveness in the sense that military rule has proved to be an obstacle to innovative changes in military bureaucracy while increasing military impunity, malfeasance, cronyism, factionalism, and unrestrained military spending.

Thailand held a general election on March 24, 2019, and the election result favored a coalition of anti-junta parties. However, the NCPO-appointed Election Commission thereupon recalculated the electoral formula to produce an outcome favorable to the junta and the junta-created party Palang Pracharat. By July, Palang Pracharat was able to form a cabinet with its favored nominee Gen. Prayuth Chan-ocha as prime minister. In a conflict of interest, Gen. Prayuth had led the junta overseeing the election and Election Commission up until the latter’s investiture as post-election prime minister. Since coming to office, Prayuth and Palang Pracharat have relied on a tiny majority in the Lower House as well as the junta-appointed Senate to remain in power. In March 2020, the advent of the coronavirus pandemic offered Prayuth a new rationale to declare an emergency decree, enhancing greater direct rule over the country.

In late 2020, Thailand’s military-dominated quasi democracy (as legitimized by the king’s support) offered only limited political space for civilians. Within the next decade, this situation shows little sign of changing. Subject to monarchical endorsement, soldiers continue to exercise enormous power across Thailand’s political stage behind weak civilian rule. Ultimately, achieving greater effectiveness for the Thai military would not only necessitate a return to civilian rule but also require greatly improved civilian control over the military.

Notes
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7 Duncan McCargo and Ukrist Pathmanand, The Thaksinization of Thailand (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2005), 133.
9 McCargo and Ukrist, The Thaksinization of Thailand, 151.
10 McCargo and Ukrist, 137.
12 Author’s own calculations based upon Senate (Thailand), Elected Senators (Bangkok: Senate, 2008), www.senate.go.th/th_senate/English/members_biodata.pdf.
28 The 2001 election of populist Thaksin Shinawatra provoked an intensifying divide between the rural poor majority who supported him and the urban middle- and upper class minority who despised him. The schism continues today.


“Kingdom of Thailand Constitution (2014).”


Bangkok Post, “Dangerous Militarization of Thai Justice.”


Global Firepower, “2019 Thailand Military Strength.”


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57 For example, the United States has trained with Thailand in joint drills each year since 1982; China has similarly trained with Thailand since 2016.


67 There is also a factional competition between confidantes of Prayuth and supporters of Prawit.


71 Mokkasen, “Thai Treasury.”
