



Lessons from Bangkok's political woes

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WITH the coup d'état of 22 May 2014, Thailand vaulted back to its familiar position as a cautionary tale. After much speculation, the anticipated takeover came with an announcement by General Prayuth Chan-ocha. Like his many predecessors as coup-maker-in-chief he took the microphone to confirm that the military was, once again, in charge. Nobody was surprised.

After almost a decade of episodic political distress the famous Thai smile hides stark divisions. Thailand has failed to build a stable consensus about how to distribute political and economic power. And powerful interests, including in the palace and the army, don't respect electoral mandates.

Since the second half of 2013 the opponents of former prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra ran an effective and demoralising campaign against her government. They barricaded parts of Bangkok, brandished whistles to indicate that Yingluck's 'time was up', and disrupted the smooth operation of official premises with ultimatums and sit-ins.

Through this chaotic period there were always worries that a coup—judicial, military or bureaucratic—would end Thailand's flirtation with representative democracy. And so it went.

This 2014 coup brings numbing anxiety about the prospect of civil war: a dramatic descent into the abyss that could pit northerner against southerner, rural against urban. Talk of a regional schism, once the preserve of

Protesters vent their anger in Bangkok on 25 May, after the junta placed all law-making authority in the hand of Thailand's army chief.

online ranters, has gone mainstream. The kingdom—a unitary state fortified by the principle of unity above all else—is dangerously divided.

The royal family deserves some of the blame for this situation. During the twilight of King Bhumibol Adulyadej's astonishing and unprecedented 68-year reign, at a time when the institution needed to unite the people, it has taken sides in an unbecoming battle for political dominance. It has not weathered these storms unscathed. Thailand's most ardent democratic voices identify palace aides as their enemies.

Republican attitudes, which had been largely dormant since the 1980s,

are re-emerging. And what was once a gentle, and private, rumble of dissent about the political role of the royals now takes on more extreme forms. With unhelpful external conditions, or bad luck, Thailand could topple from its perch among the most successful societies in Asia.

That prospect—one that would have seemed ludicrous merely a decade ago—now looms ominously for a country that has become comfortable with its positive international and regional standing. Across Southeast Asia there are worries that Thailand's internal strife could lead to problems in the wider neighbourhood. Among the members of ASEAN there is characteristic reluctance to show undue concern about what are, officially, the internal matters of a sovereign member state. But that stale prescription ignores the role that Thailand plays as an economic and logistics hub, to say nothing of its leadership in a region where democracy has shallow roots. Thailand, after the coup, is faced with the chance that it will no longer have the respect of its peers.

At this moment of mounting concern, leaders, intellectuals and analysts across the region are craning their necks to learn what they can from Thailand's woes. They hope that prompt recovery is possible but many will appreciate that it can take decades to fully redress the trauma that is being inflicted. Some countries in Southeast Asia have not yet managed to get past their histories of internal strife. Thailand is now exhibiting, in real-time, and for the 'internet generation', that its politics is a blood-sport, and one where all too tragically there are no real winners.

So what lessons should the other nine countries of ASEAN take from Thailand's experience? Should they

be worried that their own systems are vulnerable to such rolling political tumult?

Crucially, Thailand demonstrates that there can be serious repercussions when democratic elections require a changing of the guard. The government of deposed former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, the older brother of former prime minister Yingluck, which held power from 2001 until the coup of 2006, represented an uncomfortable challenge to the old order of royal, military and bureaucratic authority.

PICTURE: NARONG SANGNAK / EPA / AAP



General Prayuth Chan-ocha: followed the path of his predecessors to become a coup-maker.

Thaksin's interpretation of Thai politics was brash, economically boastful and wildly popular. He also demonstrated the repugnant authoritarianism in which so many Thai strongmen indulge. The rule of law suffered as he steamrolled opponents too many to name. Yet nowadays many Thais remember the stability and prosperity of the Thaksin years as a benign golden age. In this context, powerful forces in Thailand, such as the army and the palace, couldn't accept the prestige that Thaksin accumulated, or the way he so profitably blurred the boundaries between business and politics.

Thaksin upset the self-appointed

guardians of decency. He also threatened to comprehensively displace those he consistently defeated at the ballot box by interfering with specific career trajectories. The coup of 19 September 2006 was the response to his electoral success and the years since have witnessed the tough struggle to redefine Thai democracy.

But Thaksin's allies still win every election, most recently in February 2014. It is fair to judge that neither side is unblemished and that there is no simple way of delineating Thailand's 'good' and 'bad' elements. Even those who succeed electorally have a tentative relationship with democratic virtue.

This is a profound issue for democrats across Southeast Asia—the nature of elite interests means that those who win elections often hold fundamentally undemocratic perspectives. Nobody who knows him well would claim, with a straight face, that Thaksin is an exemplar of democratic instincts. Instead, he is the type of political operator who does well in a system where power and money are jealously sought and where one can beget the other. Across Southeast Asia the quest for power through electoral means, and through popular campaigns, gives elites new prizes to cherish and new battles to fight. Even though Thaksin has led political parties and a social movement that are emboldened by support from the masses, and partly by the rhetoric of social inclusion and economic redistribution, his primary focus remains the accumulation of power.

In the Thai instance the primacy of the monarchy, its guards in the military and the handfuls of dominant commercial enterprises that support the entire machine were challenged by Thaksin's alternative juggernaut. The



Protesters in Bangkok confront a police officer during demonstrations against the junta.

democratic constitution of 1997, the one under which Thaksin was elected in 2001 and 2005, gave hope that a compromise between popular interests and the elite would be possible. That proved chimerical, and since the coup of 2006 many Thais have wondered whether they will ever regain the optimism of democracy's yesteryears.

With the monarchy and military prepared to challenge legitimate electoral mandates, the anti-democratic instincts of these powerful groups have been highlighted and criticised, although in the Thai case there still is no all-out assault on privilege and its beneficiaries. Instead, apathetic acceptance reigns. It is unclear whether, in the fullness of time, those entrenched elite interests will survive the turbulence and unpredictability that has been unleashed by the stoush with Thaksin. For some people the struggle has existential consequences, with the cosmological and material layers dangerously entwined.

The Thai conundrum also has

its own international dimension, especially at a time of ambitious integration across ASEAN. It has been determined that 2015 will be the year for the implementation of the ASEAN Economic Community. Thailand has been a strong supporter of these integrative efforts and is one of the societies best-prepared to deal with greater intra-regional mobility. The country, for instance, already absorbs around two million migrant workers from Myanmar. Its economy is flexible, nimble and globally connected. It could see a new economic boom once the ASEAN efforts bear fruit.

Thailand also benefits from the investment, construction and consumption frenzy in adjacent Myanmar. Many Thai firms are aggressively seeking opportunities across the border. As transport and communication links improve there will be countless ways for Thais to exploit what is described as Asia's 'next frontier'. But all of this potential progress could be undermined by the problems at home. Those problems

could make Thailand a much more difficult neighbour.

Thailand's instability may even encourage the creation of enemies abroad.

The skirmishes with Cambodia in 2011 under Thailand's conservative Abhisit Vejjajiva government are one example. Thailand, after the coup, may also find its relations with Myanmar are strained as both nations flex their muscles along the border. But these are not the major problems. Thailand's current internal preoccupations ensure that it is vulnerable to intrigue. At one level, lax law enforcement has made it a hub for regional smuggling: in people, weapons and even fake documents. Its sophisticated 21st century economy is almost fully tied to global markets but it is also saturated by criminal activities. Regulation is politicised by partisan and sectoral priorities.

That is not a common formula for long-term success.

Yet, at another level, Thailand is subject to profound geopolitical shifts. Competition between China and the United States has a Thai nexus, with both countries claiming precedence and seeking to carve out new areas for dominance. In the long term there may not be room for everyone, no matter how adept Thai diplomats tend to be. For a neighbourhood that has recently been insulated from major power competition, invocations of ASEAN primacy may not be sufficient protection—especially when one of the primary players in Southeast Asia's regional politics is so preoccupied with internal affairs.

Is Thailand ASEAN's weak link?

With this question ringing loudly, it is the management of internal affairs themselves that should provide the greatest lesson, and warning, for the rest of Southeast Asia. Thailand's

monarchy and its backers in the military are not prepared to accept Thaksin and his proxies' dominance of elections and the mandates that these give them to influence so many aspects of national life. In response they have precipitated a conflict that has already generated many years of instability and violence. Major problems that predate the 2006 anti-Thaksin coup, such as rampant inequality and the civil war in southern Thailand, have not been dealt with adequately. Instead, overwhelming attention has been devoted to brawling in Bangkok. The latest coup only reinforces that long-term pattern.

For ASEAN, a region that is peculiarly sensitive to interference in supposedly 'internal' affairs, there is very little that can be done. But the lessons that internal problems can blight a decade of potential progress should be all too apparent. In Thailand it is the defence of the monarchy that has become the over-riding concern. The primacy of this one institution has parallels across the region.

In Myanmar it could prove that in the future the military—its image diminished by the rise of civilian politicians—seeks to re-assert itself. The Philippines, a rambunctious place at the best of times, has struggled to get past the ways its elites have historically divided up the spoils. In Indonesia, jousting plutocratic factions could easily get into a battle without end. Then there are those systems where one party has held power for so long. In Singapore, Malaysia, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, decades-long rule is being tested from many directions.

They all face the prospect of internet-inspired mobilisations, even insurrections, and are looking at Thailand's quagmire with concern.

At the regional level, it is true

that Southeast Asia has developed an impressive array of institutions to manage international conflicts. These are hardly perfect but the preeminence of ASEAN and its insistence on 'amity and cooperation' offers the peoples of the region some confidence that a major regional war is unlikely. But the mechanisms for the management of internal feuds are as basic as ever.

To protect against the most disastrous future outcomes, Southeast Asia would be wise to carefully heed Thailand's problems. These are problems born of a common inheritance of elite dominance in politics and the economy; hesitation about representative democracy; and the careless expectation that old systems will last forever. As time marches on, the constant calls for more pragmatic, cautious and patient adjudication of political and economic development will sound increasingly hollow. Many people want change. And still the idea that entrenched elites will surrender much power is wrong almost everywhere.

Since the retreat of colonialism, the entrenchment of powerful local elites has been the dominant Southeast Asian political characteristic. It just so happens that in Thailand a new elite, spearheaded by Thaksin, rose

General Prayuth's junta has already made its agenda clear with a rolling crackdown against dissidents, academics and independent media

to challenge for supremacy. The old guard have decided that they can't go without a fight.

This should not imply that Thailand will implode: we hope that the most pessimistic analyses are wrong and that the situation after the 2014 coup will offer new chances for compromise, even conciliation. Such a gentle end to Thailand's difficulties would save lives and resources, and further endorse a commendable Southeast Asian style of negotiated settlements.

There are those in Thailand, however, who are now unable to concede such an outcome. Instead they relish the brinkmanship, believing that their ultimate goal, the obliteration of their opponents, will be worth the hardship and recriminations. General Prayuth's junta has already made its agenda clear with a rolling crackdown against dissidents, academics and independent media. Things could get ugly.

Across Southeast Asia this is the prospect that needs to be watched most carefully. It would have obvious implications for Thailand and its regional standing, but that's not the main point in the long term. What would really matter are the reverberations from any extreme scenario in Thailand.

If Thailand ends badly then all of Southeast Asia will be faced with tough decisions about how political institutions, both national and regional, need to be rethought. **EAFO**

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