



*Review Article*

**Returning Soldiers to the Barracks: Military Reform as the Crucial First Step in Democratising Thailand**

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**ABSTRACT**

Thailand's transformation from absolute monarchy in 1932 to military dictatorship in 2017 has witnessed 13 successful coups d'état across 84 years. The Thai military (as supported by aristocracy) is a principal obstacle to achieving lasting democracy. Examples of its anti-democratic behaviour include its crushing of protesters in 1973, 1976, 1992 and 2010. The latest putsch in 2014 has resulted in systematic intimidation and repression of political opponents, with Thailand descending into "military bureaucratic authoritarianism." Since the military is such a strong barrier to democratisation, the next democratically elected government must undertake military reforms as its first priority. Such reforms must include demobilisation, downsizing, conscription reduction, military budget reduction, abolishment of martial law, audits of the military budget, changes in legislation to severely punish military coup-leaders by eliminating the pattern of amnesties and immunities and reform of military-dominated agencies. The study suggests that if comprehensive military reform is allowed to take off, it may bring the military under civilian control, creating professionalism, preventing the situation of a (military) state within a state and strengthening civilian supremacy. If this can be achieved then democratisation and sustainable reconciliation will have opportunities to flourish.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Since the 1932 democratic revolution that overthrew the absolute monarchy in Thailand (known then as Siam), the "Royal

Thai Army” has successfully staged 13 successful coups (Chambers, 2016) from over 30 attempts at overthrowing various democratically elected or appointed governments (Chamnan, 2010). Although it claims to be neutral and apolitical, the military is a political actor and interest group, playing a leading role in Thai politics. Largely because it demonstrates its capacity to use violence, it remains unchallenged by other Thai actors who might in theory be capable of Security Sector Reform (SSR), i.e., executive management actors such as the Prime Minister’s Office, Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC), the National Security Council (NSC), the National Intelligence Agency, the Ministry of Justice; legislative actors including the military standing committee; financial actors, including the Finance Ministry, Bureau of the Budget and the State Audit Commission; judicial oversight actors such as the Criminal Court, Department of Special Investigations and Human Rights Committee; political parties and civil society groups such as Puea Thai Party and the Thai Journalists Association (Chambers, 2016, pp. 5-13). Chambers stresses that the perception of civilian control over Thailand’s security sector, especially the army, is essentially a myth because of five factors, namely, the army being established first and therefore becoming entrenched, the fact that executive management actors were primarily created by military prime ministers as tokens, the fact that the majority of legislative management, financial oversight, and judicial and rule of

law actors have only been established since the 1997 constitution, a lack of experience in military affairs by other actors, and the tendency for retired military personnel to become embedded in other actors (Chambers, 2016, p. 13).

Nordlinger (1977) argues that the military is a fortress to protect the social benefits of traditional elites and the middle class, rather than to safeguard interests of the people, and the Thai military illustrates this very well. Its ideology locates it as a servant of monarchy—the most traditional of the Thai elite. Meanwhile, it has ousted governments elected by landslide victories and crushed protests of the lower and middle classes. The latest coup (2014) has likewise been followed by the constant harassment, arrest and imprisonment of pro-democracy dissidents.

Against this backdrop, Thai society cannot imagine returning to democracy or experiencing reconciliation, without admitting and addressing the fact that the military is a principal barrier to democratisation. In a democratic regime, addressing institutional relationships requires military responsibility and accountability. Bringing the military under civilian supremacy is essential for consolidating democratisation (Bruneau & Matei, 2008). This study argues that the Thai military’s evolution to become an enormously-powerful, interventionist security institution, with a mindset disdainful of elected civilians, insulated from civilian control and linked to monarchy, represents a leading obstacle

to Thai democratization. Therefore, the next elected government must undertake military reform as its first priority. The study is structured in an attempt to demonstrate how the military evolved to become an institution, which is unaccountable, untouchable and uncontrollable. Following the introduction, it briefly discusses the Thai military's mindset and organisation, its historical development, how it functions as an autonomous organisation and its use of violence. The study then details needed military reforms before offering a conclusion.

#### **THAILAND'S MILITARY MINDSET AND ORGANIZATIONAL AUTONOMY**

Thailand's military is similar to militaries in other lower-middle income countries in that it has never trusted democracy or electoral politics (Janowitz, 1977). Certainly, the distinctive competencies of the army are centralised command, hierarchy, discipline, intercommunication, esprit de corps, isolation and self-sufficiency (Finer, 1962), as well as "internal cohesion" (Barany, 2013). Under an organisation like this, the Thai military considers itself too strong to be under elected civilian control. Importantly, the military leadership believes that they have the expertise to apply their military structure to politics and economics, and are the most competent administrators. This mindset is identical to the authoritarian military regimes of Latin America under a system of "bureaucratic authoritarianism", in which the army

believes it has more governing capability than any civilian government (O' Donnell, 1988).

According to Huntington (1957), for a military to be apolitical and neutral, it is necessary to create a professional soldier corps. Yet for Finer (1962, p.22), where a military seeks to maintain expertise, responsibility and corporateness, it might feel that a coup is necessary. Ockey (2007, p. 124) contends that in Thailand, a late-1970s military mindset favouring professionalism led to the creation of a "Professional Soldiers" faction which itself became political and ironically helped lead the 2006 putsch. Because of the military's politicised nature, Pathmanand (2008, p. 139) finds that arch-royalist soldiers "carried out the 2006 coup to protect the monarchy." More recently, Sirivunnabood and Ricks (2016, p. 30) argued that for Thai soldiers sometimes "professional" perceptions of responsibility make them overthrow governments that they deem as unjust while demands for military corporateness sometimes comes to outweigh an apolitical military stance. Thai military ideology rationalises an interventionism in politics to protect the state (Rakson, 2010). However, the client in the state which the military subjectively serves is the monarchy, rather than any elected government, making Huntington's notion of objective civilian control inapplicable to the Thai case. Thailand's military mindset subscribes to professionalisation in terms of strength, unity and efficiency, but it answers only to the King. Moreover, as guardian of the

palace, the military achieves a level of legitimacy which makes it insulated from elected civilian control (Chambers & Waitookiat, 2016).

For Prem Tinsulanonda—former Army Chief as well as Prime Minister and current Privy Council President, “professionalism” specifically means specifically “the King’s soldiers” (cited in Nanuam, 2009b). Air Chief Marshal *Chalit* Pookpasuk, former Commander of the Royal Thai Air Force and current member of the Privy Council, illustrated in response to the reports that he might be transferred, “I am a professional soldier and the King’s soldier. How will anyone dare to transfer me?” (cited in Nanuam, 2009a). Historically, the military has given greater importance to the royal institution than to the government; it has been clear that the elite within the armed forces considered themselves to be a private guard unit to the royal family (Tamada, 2014). This situation has led the military to become a leading proponent of harsh punishments for anyone accused of insulting monarchy.

Thailand’s military sometimes allows governments to utilise its services. However, the military remains an informally autonomous institution. A number of famous quotations by Thai military men illustrate this attitude: “Politicians have never helped sustain order better than the army” (Prasai SeviKul, 1974, cited in Samudavanija, 1982); “Thai democracy is like teaching the babies to walk... they cannot look after themselves and need a caretaker. Thus, Thai

democracy, like a baby needs a caretaker; the military” (Ruekdee Chart-U-tit, 1976, cited in Samudavanija, 1982); “Politicians think only of their followers and need to concentrate power but break up unity and vie for better positions without a political ideology, without good intentions for the public; they just think of their personal gain. Politicians don’t know their purpose and do not understand what a real democracy is” (General Jeua Gedsian, 1977, cited in Samudavanija, 1982); “The army is a better representative of the Thai population than politicians” (General Arthit Kamlang-ek, cited in Phiu-Nual, 1990). Even among all these examples, without a doubt, the best example of this attitude are the words of General Prem Tinasulanonda, former prime minister (1980-1988) and current president of the Privy Council which advises the King. Just prior to the 2006 coup, he called in army leaders for a publicised meeting, in which he said: “Horse owners hire jockeys to ride the horses. The jockeys do not own the horses. They just ride them... A government is like a jockey. It supervises soldiers, but the real owners are the country and the King” (cited in Cropley, 2008).

The aforementioned ideas are deeply rooted in Thai society. The military regards itself as an autonomous organisation, not controlled by a civilian government. Furthermore, they see any civilian government as illegitimate, though it is elected by the majority of the population because the elite military officers perceive voters as mostly rural, uneducated people who lack rationality in their voting decisions

and sell their votes. Notably, the elite of the army is predominantly conservative in their political ideology. Thus, an important question is as they do not recognise politicians, if forced, what kind of politician will they support? The background of Thai politics shows that Thai military officials tend to back only those politicians who appeal to the traditional elite and the middle classes. In recent political history, this has meant the Democrat Party, and the “Yellow Shirts,” the first a conservative, generally royalist-leaning party, the second a right-wing protest movement. Since the 2014 military coup, Thai society has fallen under the full control of the military. Bamrungsuk (2015) argues that the military has successfully created a “military bureaucratic authoritarianism” in Thai politics. Thus, contemporary Thai politics depends on a mechanism in which the army controls and rules the country, and this arrangement finds support from the elites and middle class with the promise to “sustain stability” in different aspects in Thailand. The elites support this situation because keeping stability under military bureaucratic authoritarianism supposedly enables better economic development than a civilian government.

### **HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE ROYAL THAI MILITARY**

Before 1870, Siam had no permanent standing army. It relied upon the deployment of an ancient labour system called *rabob phrai*. In the 1880s, King Rama V initiated many projects to modernise the army. He

established the Defense Ministry, created several higher military institutions, called for massive investment in weaponry and military equipment, and enacted a military conscription law. These projects imitated Western army attributes and made the country’s army distinct from civilian institutions. In fact, the Siamese army was established for two reasons. First was to protect the monarchy from its “enemies” both from outside and inside; these enemies had to be eliminated, or otherwise tamed for the King (Chambers, 2013, p. 5). Second, the military was established to extend the King’s power throughout the kingdom and centralise the country, particularly the Northeast. The Thai army, therefore, was closely related to the King, and called the “King’s army” from the outset (Breazeale, 1975).

Under the absolute monarchy, power was concentrated in the hands of the King and a few traditional elites. During the reign of King Rama VI, because of massive spending by the palace on a war machine at the expense of economic development, frustration and dissatisfaction arose among some low-ranking military, who became rebellious, resulting in three coup plots, most noticeably in 1912 (Chambers, 2013, p. 583). In 1932, however, the absolute monarchy was overthrown and Siam (now Thailand) became dominated by the “People’s Party,” comprised of young military officers and civilian bureaucrats. The most important objective of this regime’s military was to protect the “constitution” and the “rule of law”.

Thus, the military in this era deemed itself a “constitutional military” (Phiu-Nual, 1990).

In 1944, the military-led People’s Party fell from power and an elected civilian government attempted to transform Thailand to become a more pluralist society. With support from the royalists and associated aristocrats, however, the military ousted the government in 1947 and returned to exert influence over the country. In 1951, the military-dominant regime weakened monarchical power; but in 1957-1958, a new military regime resurrected some monarchical authority to enhance its own legitimacy. Meanwhile, the 1947 emergence of the Cold War led to massive United States military spending in Thailand in the war against Communism, which strengthened Thailand’s military. Ultimately, the military possessed preeminent political sway over Thailand from 1947 until 1973. Indirectly, the country has been influenced by the military ever since.

Under Article 17 of the 1959 military-enacted constitution, the Prime Minister could exercise dictatorial power and arrest, imprison or even execute “suspects” or “wrong-doers” without court warrants (Boonbongkarn, 1994). Also, many key political posts were occupied by senior military officers. Riggs (1966) described Thai government during this period as a “bureaucratic polity”, a system in which the military and bureaucracy held absolute power.

Though the military regime fell from power in 1973, the elected civilian government which followed was ousted by the armed forces in 1976. Thereupon, a civilian-led, quasi-military regime held power until 1977, when the military again usurped total power and held it until 1979. Then, between 1979 and 1988, a military-guided semi-democracy existed, whereby an unelected military prime minister and appointed Senate existed alongside an elected Lower House. In 1988, another weak democracy came to office but it was overthrown in 1991 by armed forces, which returned to the barracks in 1992. Post-1992, Thailand experienced a growing democracy and a pluralistic constitution was introduced in 1997. At this point, most people thought that the military had returned to the barracks permanently.

In 2001, Thaksin Shinawatra was elected Prime Minister. Though popular among the rural poor, he was detested by traditional elites and urban middle classes. (Keyes, 2014). In 2006, the People’s Alliance for Democracy, known as the “Yellow Shirts”, protested against the Thaksin administration, and called for intervention by the military. Eventually, the army carried out a coup d’état on September 19, 2006.

After this coup, the military regime enacted a new constitution, Thailand’s 18<sup>th</sup>, aimed at constraining Thaksin and his supporters. The charter weakened political parties, increased judicial authority and created a half-appointed Senate. Nevertheless, the 2007 general election

(won by a pro-Thaksin party) proved that most Thai voters still supported him. Eventually, the Constitutional Court, which had seemed to oppose Thaksin, ruled that this party must be dissolved. Following the ruling, the army intervened to support a coalition shift, whereby Abhisit Vejjajiva, the anti-Thaksin Democrat Party leader, became the next Prime Minister (The Economist, 2008).

Thais angered by Abhisit's shady rise to power took to the streets under the banner of the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship, colloquially known as the "Red Shirts." However, their demonstrations were repressed by the military in 2009 and 2010. In the 2011 general election, Yingluck Shinawatra, Thaksin's younger sister, became the prime minister. Her government, like that of her brother, was supported by lower and some middle class people. However, her government met the same fate as her brother's, being toppled in 2014. Protests led by the Secretary-General of the Democrat Party (who then resigned) Suthep Thaugsuban, and pushed forward by his People's Committee for Absolute Democracy with the King as Head of State (PCAD) began in late 2013, and continued beyond Yingluck's dissolution of parliament and organisation of February 2014 elections, which were sabotaged by protesters and voided by the judiciary. Suthep's protest group consisted of regenerated Yellow Shirts, including the elite and middle classes in Bangkok and the south. The protesters created instability and

repeatedly called for the army to overthrow the government. Eventually, on May 20, 2014, Prayuth Chan-ocha, Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Thai Army, declared martial law and launched a coup d'état two days later, citing the political impasse as an excuse. Contrary to his claims at the time, it is clear that the coup was not a last minute decision. According to a later interview with Suthep, "Before martial law was declared [on May 20], General Prayuth told me that you and your masses of PCAD supporters are too exhausted. It's now the duty of the army to take over the task" (Campbell, 2014). Suthep and General Prayuth had long-standing ties stemming from their roles in the suppression of Red Shirt protestors during the violent clashes in 2009 and 2010.

#### **THE THAI MILITARY AS UNACCOUNTABLE, UNTOUCHABLE AND UNCONTROLLABLE**

Historically, an enormous budget has been invested in strengthening the armed forces. During the years 1950 to 1975, the Thai military received substantial financial support from the United States. This included US\$ 650 million in economic aid, of which nearly 75% was for counter-insurgency, US\$ 940 million for Thai defense and security, or over 50% of Thailand's own domestic military expenditure, US\$ 760 million on operating costs, including military equipment for Thailand and payment for Thai troops in Vietnam, US\$ 250 million for air bases constructed in Thailand, and US\$

850 million from US soldiers pumped directly into the economy (Kislenko, 2004). The purpose of such funding was to fight communist insurgents. This funding covered all expenses such as weapons, education, military training and propaganda for values, vision and ideology. This essentially underwrote a process of “Americanisation” for Thailand’s military (Bamrungsuk, 2015). However, when the United States withdrew from Southeast Asia in 1975, the Thai military had to become more self-reliant. From then on, military regimes increased the budgetary allocations for the fighting services units. From 1980 until 1992, budgetary allocations for the military rose to 17.35% of the overall fiscal budget of the country, which was higher than the budgets for education and public health. Importantly, the government hardly reduced the budget proposed by the military; in other words, the military always received the full amount requested. Sometimes, the budget was even increased from the requested proposal in order to please the leaders of the armed forces. Few members of the parliament ever questioned such biased allocations. In 1984, Kleaw Norapati, a progressive MP, criticised the large “secret budget” of the military. This particular budget was not required to itemise or detail its planned expenses. He called this practice an “ogre” (cited in Satha-Anand, 1996).

Since the 2006 coup, military spending has skyrocketed. From 2006-2009, the military budget rose from US\$ 2.4 billion to US\$ 4.8 billion, an unprecedented

increase. In 2013, it grew to US\$ 5.9 billion, increased again to US\$ 6.1 billion in 2015, and in 2016, swelled to US\$ 6.3 billion (SIPRI, 2016). In 2014, the *Global Firepower Index* reported that Thailand had the twenty-fourth most powerful military in the world (Macias et al., 2014), but by 2015, Thailand had risen to number twenty (Global Firepower, 2015). Under the current military regime, it is nearly certain that this budget will not be audited and lacks transparency. It cannot be scrutinised by the public, and the budget allocated for purchasing weapons has often been a part of the corruption in the Thai armed forces. Historically, corruption and kickbacks have permeated the Thai military via “narcotics trafficking, extortion rackets, illegal bookmaking, unsecured loans from Thai Military Bank and corruption in the conscription process” (Ockey, 2001, p. 201), including irregularities in the purchase of equipment. In recent years, the military purchased the GT200 explosive detector, worth US\$ 40 million. It was subsequently found that the devices were fake, with no moving or mechanical parts, a scandal that made world news (Thairepublica, 2013).

Aside from the issue of budgetary allocation and transparency, legislation has also tended to empower the military. After the 2006 military coup, there were three new laws enacted; the first one was the Internal Security Act of 2008. This Act decisively increased the power for the military to keep the peace in the country. The second was the Thai Public Broadcasting Service Act of 2008, which



allowed the armed forces to legally exert control over telecommunications using the very high frequency (VHF) system. The Act permitted the military to continue control over two, out of five television stations, as well as numerous radio stations all over the country and also gave the military greater profits. The third law was the Rules of Military Officers Act of 2008, which specified the rules and regulations for the appointment and transfer of military generals. The law stated that any transfer proceeding must be under the management of the committee consisting of six or seven officers (five from the army and one or two civilian politicians), including the commanders of three armed forces, the armed forces commander in-chief and the permanent secretary of the Ministry of Defense, plus the political bodies; Ministry of Defense, and if there is a deputy of Ministry of Defense, he will be in this committee, too. This Act terminated civilian control over the military in the area of military reshuffles.

The Thai military is administered in the same manner as other organizations, which continue to operate under a patronage system, especially the Kings Guard and the Queens Guard. Members of these military units progress to important positions within the country and assume they are exclusively the King's and Queen's soldiers. Like other military officers, they believe that they are not beholden to civilian control. Indeed, Lieutenant Colonel Sanyalak Tangsiri, commander of a battalion involved in the 2006 putsch remarked afterward that "We

are ready to do what the King asks. We are soldiers who belong to His Majesty" (cited in Nanuam, 2006). Comments like these show that when the military claimed to be working "for the King," they believed themselves absolved of any responsibility to the government (Tamada, 2014). Thus, they see themselves as above reproach or untouchable.

Because the army is an organisation which cannot be controlled, this means that their use of power has virtually no limits. The world of the military is "an exclusive world" separate from general society (Bamrungsuk, 2015). The armed forces believe they are beholden to no one, except the monarchy. Practices that would be unheard of in other professional militaries, such as having large numbers of draftees follow high ranking officers like an entourage, or having them work at officers' private houses or as a driver for the wife of the officer are actually quite common within the Thai military, even though the salaries of these draftees are paid by the taxes of all Thai people. Similarly, in cases of soldiers who violate the law, they are brought to the military court, and only stand before the civilian court if the military allows it. Furthermore, the army has the right to declare martial law in the event that it believes the political situation in the country is unstable or untenable. This law, introduced in 1914, can still be invoked. The armed forces' uncontrollability is also reflected in the fact that the military is always catered to by politicians, even when politicians are

in control of the government, be it for weapons, funding for security, or demands for additional “wages” after a military takeover. Additionally, large numbers of army officers have obtained positions in state enterprises, and it is common practice that when a private company wishes to obtain a benefit from the state, it brings high ranking military officers onto the board of directors. Clearly said, being an uncontrollable organisation is reflected in the military’s excessive use of power in both military and civil realms.

The current excessive use of power is not only performed through military force but also through the military’s post-2014 majority within the junta-created National Legislative Assembly (NLA), members of which were all appointed by the military. In both the 2006 and 2014 military takeovers, the appointed NLA members, who today are tasked with the rewriting of the constitution, primarily come from the army, police, right-wing civilians and anti-Thaksin civilian bureaucrats. The NLA voted to impeach Yingluck, and they also ruled that she must stay out of politics for five years. This excessive expression of power is also mirrored in law. Under the current junta, many new laws are being introduced without public input. Meanwhile, a new constitution is being written, which appears to enhance power. It allows for the appointment of a non-elected prime minister and a junta-appointed Senate which can censure a Prime Minister (The Nation, August 25, 2015).

The evidence above suggests that the Thai military is indeed unaccountable, untouchable and uncontrollable; the clout of the armed forces has penetrated almost all areas of administration. Not only under the current military state, but also under democratic rule, Thai governments have been unable to check the military’s influence and the pattern looks set to continue.

### **THAI MILITARY AS AN AGENT OF VIOLENCE WITHIN THE STATE**

There are many historical incidents where the military used violence against citizens. Such brutality occurred following the suppression of civilian reformers after the 1947 coup. In 1947, the military government enacted the Act for Protecting Order, which gave the military absolute power to detain anyone which it deemed a danger to the nation. The military-dominated regime also executed three people on flimsy evidence for their alleged assassination of King Rama VIII. Yimprasert (2009) called this incident “the most stigmatic in Thai political history” (cited in Kasetsiri, 2009). Later, during the time of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat (1958-1963), a large number of left-wing politicians and intellectuals were incarcerated or executed. Moreover, the military perpetrated violence against Muslims in Thailand’s Deep South—with atrocities continuing to this day.

Five instances, in particular, demonstrate the military’s use of violence in society. The first was the student uprising of October 14, 1973. Students were not

happy with the then military regime's corrupt, authoritarian nature and the lack of a progressive constitution. Tensions grew following the regime's detention of thirteen lecturers and students who had distributed flyers demanding a new constitution. Later, students gathered in the hundreds of thousands at Thammasat University, demanding the release of the thirteen detainees. A high ranking army official in the government said, "If we kill ten or twenty thousand students, the nation will be peaceful." Although the government released the thirteen people, the military used live ammunition to suppress the students gathered to demand their release. The result was the death of 77 people, with another 857 injured and missing (Kasetsiri, 2013).

The second occurrence was yet another student massacre on October 6, 1976. Before the massacre, the monarchy and conservative elites became involved in the establishment of rabid right-wing groups intent on destroying progressive societal organisations (Bowie, 1997). The army played a leading role in the massacre of students at Thammasat on October 6, 1976, and there were reports of desecration done to the dead bodies and students being burned alive, female students being raped, and more. It is not clear how many people died; the official body count was 46 but students believed it was more than 100, and that many more bodies were disposed of (Matichon, October 6, 2014). Nevertheless, after the incidents, a large number of students were imprisoned for

at least two years without being charged and many other students fled into rural areas of Thailand to escape assassination by the army. Many did eventually join the Communist Party of Thailand.

The third occurrence is the bloody May incident in 1992. This is yet another case in which the army killed citizens in the middle of the capital, Bangkok. The people of Bangkok called for General Suchinda Kraprayoon, an appointed yet unelected prime minister who originally came to power through the 1991 military coup d'état, to step down. But he refused. His rejection of the people's demands resulted in tens of thousands of people, consisting predominantly of the Bangkok middle class, gathering at Rajadamnoen Road in Bangkok, attempting to pressure Suchinda to step down. Live ammunition was once more used to disperse the protesters, resulting in 44 confirmed deaths, although the actual number was likely higher. Many believe the true number has been covered up. In addition, there were at least 600 injuries (Kasetsiri, 2013). For 14 years, this event tarnished the people's image of the military. Only in 2006 had it recovered enough to stage another coup against the Thaksin's government.

The fourth incident is when Red Shirts were massacred in 2009 and 2010. The Red Shirts demanded that unelected Prime Minister Abhisit dissolve the parliament because it was formed unconstitutionally and at the coercion of the military. The first incident started in April 2009 and was called "the Bloody *Songkran*" (*Songkran*

is Thailand's traditional New Year). The situation escalated to the extent that violence was used to suppress and break up the protesters; 70 people were reported wounded and although Abhisit claimed that this incident saw no casualties, the Red Shirts believe many people were killed and their bodies hidden by the army (Yimprasert, 2013). The following year, an even more violent political tragedy broke out. The Red Shirts mobilised a massive demonstration lasting from March until May 2010 to demand that the government dissolve the parliament. Although there were daily reports of violence on the side of the government and the protesters, large-scale violence first erupted on April 10, 2010, when the army attempted to break up the protesters, resulting in the deaths of 27 people and injuries to over 1,400 (Khaosod Editors, 2010). The climax of the violence was from May 13-19, 2010, when soldiers forcibly moved forward to end the protest. Their operation took the lives of close to 100 people and caused numerous injuries. Eighty-two people were killed by bullets, 32 of whom were shot in the head. The violence left many permanently disabled. The government spent more than three billion baht (US\$ 100 million) to control and disperse the Red Shirts by mobilising 67,000 soldiers. More than 700 million baht (US\$ 23.3 million) was spent on 25,000 police officers, and the actual total number of bullets used was 117,932 (People's Information Centre, 2012). In the aftermath, 1,857 Red Shirt supporters were incarcerated. The Missing

Person Information Centre of the Mirror Foundation reported that 50 people went missing from May 19 until June 16, 2010, and dozens of people were arrested for *lèse-majesté* (Khaosod Editors, 2010).

The fifth incident demonstrating the military's capricious use of violence has been the series of occurrences since Thailand's 2014 military putsch and transition to a garrison state. General Prayuth Chan-ocha, leader of the coup and current junta leader, continually stresses that Thai society is entering an atmosphere of reconciliation, but the meaning of reconciliation in this context is highly paradoxical because it is achieved through the silencing of dissidents with threats and intimidation. The government can be compared to "Big Brother" (1984) of George Orwell's dystopian novel *1984*. After the coup, the military regime summoned a number of politicians and political activists. Those summoned were brought in to "adjust" their political "attitude" and were made to sign agreements promising that they would not engage in any political activities, including, but not limited to, protesting or opposing the coup in public. Six months after the coup, the military had summoned 626 people and arrested 340 others. This did not include more than a thousand people who were arrested and yet not mentioned in the news. Most of the detained were perceived by the junta to be in alliance with the Yingluck government and/or were democracy and human rights activists (Ilaw, 2014). Amnesty International's report, "Attitude Adjustment – 100 Days under

Martial Law” (2014), called the widely and arbitrarily issued summonses of citizens a clear violation of human rights and an obvious tool of political intimidation. The report quoted victims who claimed that while they were held by the armed forces after responding to a summons, the military had violated their human rights through beatings, death threats, mock executions and attempted asphyxiation.

By mid-2015, the junta had summoned, arrested or detained at least 1,222 persons (United States, 2015, p. 7). Moreover, the military, demonstrating its close ties to monarchy, had charged 46 people on suspicion of *lèse-majesté* (Ilaw, 2015). Meanwhile, the military has accommodated corporations wishing to survey for natural resources in a large number of villages, despite the protests and opposition of the locals who are intimidated and suppressed. There are also soldiers of the Internal Security Operations Command who carry out surveillance in villages to prevent demonstrations of support for the former government. The junta has also halted the investigations into the 2010 violence against protesters by the military. Additionally, the government has repeatedly threatened the media and individual reporters. The regime officially declared that mass media must not criticise its work, and if media outlets did publish criticisms, they would be shut down immediately. Uniformed and undercover soldiers can enter universities at will to conduct surveillance while intimidating students and teachers.

These five episodes attest to a pattern of military violence which adds fuel to this study’s contention that Thailand’s armed forces is an institution which purposely uses brutality and intimidation to obstruct the entrenchment of democracy. Therefore, if Thai society and the next elected government have the sincere intention to create a viable democracy, the first thing that will be needed is military reform.

### **WHEN THINKING ABOUT THAI MILITARY REFORM**

Military reform leading to democratisation and reconciliation may not sound familiar to Thailand’s military. The Thai military is used to the idea that military reform means building strength and power, and expanding the troops, not submission of the military organisation to civilian rule. For example, the Tenth Military Plan (2015-2025) emphasises the policy of constant readiness for battle against any new form of threat or invasion. Thus, this justifies the need for modern, up-to-date weapons (Thairath, June 24, 2015). Reform in this sense, however, will only enhance the armed forces’ political primacy, and it creates a military “state within state”, one which remains outside the rule of civilian government. Ultimately, the more powerful the military, the higher the tendency for future coups d’état and suppression of people in the long term. Thus, military reform with the goal of eventual democratisation and reconciliation is of paramount importance for Thailand.

Though democracy-oriented military reforms were initiated in 1946, 1975 and 1998, in all three occasions, the intended modifications were cut short by military putsches. Moreover, the latest 1998 reform efforts only derived from the intentions of the military itself—then Army Chief Surayud Chulanond. Though there was limited discussion of military reforms following the 1992 massacre, neither the Thai governments nor the civil society organisations ever delivered any lasting proposals to entrench civilian control over the armed forces given the military’s propensity to legitimise its power as a monarchical guardian and also because of political divisions among civilians. Military reform in Thailand will be difficult, because the military, as demonstrated above, is an autonomous interest group and uncontrollable. The army also has a close alliance with conservative elites and the middle classes, who do not generally want to empower the country’s rural poor. Furthermore, although the current military regime has promised to eventually return Thailand to democratic, civilian rule, without military reform, even under civilian rule, Thailand is destined to continue along a path in which the military persists in consolidating power alongside weak, democratic institutions—effectively bypassing democracy.

Thus, an important question is whether in the current situation, what can Thai society do to reform the military? Also, what can the next elected government expect when it inherits a military which has

continually obstructed democratisation? This study proposes the following twelve actions to address these questions:

- 1) Create an understanding with the military about its role in the democratic regime;
- 2) Undertake steps to demythologise the current political situation. For example, rejection of the characterisation of Red Shirts as groups seeking to overthrow the King, and a reframing of the soldier’s role, so that they do not position themselves as the King’s exclusive soldiers, but rather as the people’s soldiers;
- 3) Demobilise more troops, cease conscription and downsize the military organisation;
- 4) Clarify the roles of the military: they protect the country from outside threats, offer humanitarian assistance when called upon to do so in cases of floods, drought, or other natural disasters, and serve to keep peace along the frontier and prevent narcotics trafficking in border areas;
- 5) Reduce the military budget, including the budget for weapons and establish greater auditory and investigative authority by an elected parliament and civil society so that the budget and military expenditures are checked according to the principles of transparency and accountability, and establish a civilian Office of Auditor for military spending;

- 6) Severely punish military personnel involved in coups d'état and actively prosecute security officials who participate in criminal activity;
- 7) Modify the Rules of Military Officers Act (2008) so that elected governments can themselves transfer army officers freely, and change the positions of army commanders. A vetting system should be used so that the government has the power to choose people for high-ranking positions who do not endorse violence or have aggressive attitudes;
- 8) Abolish laws and the roles of organisations which violate human rights and do not fit the current situation, such as the Internal Security Act (2008), Martial Law, Emergency Decree and Military Court (which is a one-tiered organisation perceived as legitimising the military repression following the 2014 coup d'état). Also, military-controlled organisations such as the National Intelligence Agency, the National Security Council and the Internal Security Operations Command, which exercise enormous power but are unaccountable to civilian supremacy, must come completely under the transparent control of elected civilians.
- 9) Introduce regulations which keep the Thai military from interfering in the economic affairs of the nation, especially in television, radio and state enterprises;
- 10) Draft legislation to give the public the right to access information about military operations, budgeting and weapons used in possibly violating the human rights of citizens.
- 11) Increase courses on democracy and peace at Thai military academies;
- 12) Ratification of the International Criminal Court.

Only after these twelve proposals are enshrined into law will military reform be able to commence at a level sufficient to begin resisting the recurrence of military repression with legal impunity and another military coup. Moreover, reform must be undertaken to build trust between civilians nationwide and the military (International Centre for Transitional Justice, 2014). In fact, if the social paradigm is changed and replaced by coexistence in peaceful ways with creativity rather than security, there may arise new interesting phenomena such as countries without armies or countries recognising conscientious objection to military service (Paige, 2009). Massive amounts of money currently being used to purchase weapons can instead be used to develop the economy and society. This type of reform could be especially important in Thai society, which has a huge gap between the rich and the poor—more than half of the country makes less than US\$ 400 per year (Thailand Future Foundation, 2014).

Perkins (2013) stated that in addition to fundamental military reforms, countries should strictly adhere to rule of law,

which can decrease military influence. Rule of law must be composed of eight pillars: an established court system, formal equality under the law, fact-finding through rational inquiry, procedural protections for criminal defendants, a legal profession closely intertwined with political elites, an independent judiciary, all state actions subject to legal scrutiny and low corruption.

The military reform proposals described above, combined with robust public discussion about the continued role of the military under true democratic rule can strongly promote the Thai military to become a more accountable and controllable organization. Military reform also creates true professionalism and prevents the military from becoming a state within a state, strengthening civil supremacy. If this can be achieved, not only democratisation but also sustainable reconciliation between Thailand's political and social factions may be able to flourish in Thailand.

## CONCLUSION

The military has long played a significant role in Thai politics as an unaccountable, untouchable and uncontrollable institution autonomous from elected civilian control and only answerable to the monarch. Its insulated military mindset is not suitable to a consolidated democracy. Since the 2014 coup, Thailand has become an arch-royalist military-administered bureaucratic authoritarian state. As in 1973, 1976, 1992 and 2010, the post-2014 military relied on the use of violence for political leverage,

in this case to bolster its junta in order to persist in power. The only way to diminish military violence, lessen other armed forces excesses, end the cycle of coups followed by dictatorships and ultimately initiate demilitarisation is to systematically and forcefully undertake large-scale military reform through rule of law and reconciliation. Such an agenda can only commence after the currently ruling junta leaves power and democracy returns to Thailand (in 2018, at the earliest). Yet, the new democracy envisioned by the latest constitutional draft gives diminished power to elected governments while enshrining enhanced military clout. This environment leaves Thailand with several challenges. How will such a weak democracy succeed in bringing a powerful military under civilian control? Is majority parliamentary or civilian support for military reform enough to ensure that change happens? How would elected civilians seeking military reform bypass powerful opponents in the military and aristocracy? Will there have to be another military massacre (as in 1992) that again taints the image of the military sufficient enough that reforms can occur which finally place it under effective civilian control? Though reforming Thailand's military is a necessary ingredient for the country to move toward democratic consolidation, carrying it out will actually necessitate a unity of purpose among civilians and also a realisation by soldiers themselves (and their aristocratic patrons) that it is in Thailand's best interests for the military to be under institutionalised



civilian control. Only when the military returns to the barracks and remains there as a result of a mindset shift, which requires it to obey laws enforced under democracy, will the institutions of civilian control finally offer hope for the sustainability of Thai democratisation. Yet, with authoritarian monarchists and militarists standing in the way, getting Thailand to this level of political development will be an incremental and daunting task.

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