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Democratization in Asia: Lessons from Thailand's Crisis

Thailand's socioeconomic development since the 1980s has changed the political demography of Thailand, leading to the rise of a new class that demands more political participation. Yet, the existing political system is resisting this change. What does this clash between society and political system indicate for potential change in Thailand? Is it a setback or a progress for the country's democracy? These questions were addressed at the 19th Annual Gaston Sigur Memorial Lecture on "Democratization in Asia and the Intellectuals: Lessons from Thailand's Crisis," by Thongchai Winichakul, Professor of history at University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Thailand's ongoing crisis is a painful but inevitable developmental process that a country must undergo in its transformation towards a more democratic society. The 2014 coup in Thailand reflects deep societal and structural divides amidst changes in socioeconomic development and the existing political system that resists these changes. In contrast, prior coups in Thailand have been marked by ethnic or factional conflicts between political elites or military officers. While traumatic, the coup presents a moment of potential societal transformation, from one of social chaos to possible democratization.

Cycles of conflict between Thailand's authoritarian regime and civil society have marked the country's history since 1932. Since the 1973 October movement, the country has moved towards a path to democracy, albeit a "royalist democracy" – a parliamentary system marked by political domination by royal elites who exert informal influence in major policy decision making. While royal elites do not directly dominate politics, they exert influence via decision making of budgetary issues, major policies, or major political appointments. Royal elites, otherwise referred to as monarchists, refers to the entire political block of actors who have a vested interest in keeping the monarchy in power due to the material benefits, power, and influence gained from supporting the system. The rise of royalist democracy has also witnessed the gradual retreat of the Thai military. The backbone of Thailand's political system under royalist democracy lies not in elected officials, but rather, in bureaucrats in the army and various government agencies and departments. Under this structure, the King or royal elites can bypass elected officials and work directly with those controlling the bureaucracy.

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Recently, Thailand's political landscape has begun to change with the rise of the middle class, particularly in the north and northeast. With socioeconomic development, literacy rates have improved, and many have access to higher education. This societal change has resulted in increasing demand for greater political participation and the usage of taxpayers' money for the common good. At the same time, Thai citizens have realized that the electoral system and elected officials- however corrupt they may be-remain the only channel through which they have access to public resources. What does this mean for the Thai monarchy?

Royalist democracy is built around the charismatic virtues of royal elites, particularly the King. However, because the virtues of a particular leader are not transferable to a successor, leadership succession is a precarious process as royal elites fight to maintain their influence in the political system. The underlying tensions in the 2014 coup reflected the conflict

between change in Thailand's political demography (new middle class) and the existing monarchic system struggling to remain relevant. For the monarchy, the issue of succession presents a serious threat to the maintenance of its power; this is the reason why the coup has suppressed dissent so forcefully.

Is this coup a setback or a step forward for Thai democracy? There have been numerous setbacks vis-à-vis the constitutional drafts that are currently being debated and increasing crackdowns on political dissent. New laws render the Thai upper house completely appointed by elites, limit the number of elected officials in the lower house, and strip the power of the lower house. In addition, political dissidents and opponents may be arrested and tried in military courts, even in the absence of the declaration of the state of emergency. Moreover, the targeting of political opponents has become increasingly indiscriminate. These measures are considered a "new normal" in Thai politics- royal elites taking extreme measures to maintain their power and prepare for the throne's succession. Nonetheless, the ongoing crisis has potential to push democratization forward, but necessitates some kind of intervention to avoid the coup becoming a political setback, rather than a growing pain of democratic transformation. The question on the type of intervention needed is left unanswered, but needs to continue to be debated and discussed amongst intellectuals and political observers.

By Winnie Nham, Research Manager, Rising Powers Initiative, Sigur Center for Asian Studies

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