During the so-called “Third Wave of Democratization” that swept Asia beginning in the 1980s, there was widespread optimism that democracy was developing deep roots in the region. But with growing rivalry between China and the US, and changing political dynamics in many countries in Asia, there are now growing fears of democratic backsliding throughout the region.
Fresh Energy Needed to Challenge Thailand’s Military-Monarchy System
By Pavin Chachavalpongpun

Thailand’s struggle to strengthen and deepen its democracy faces a formidable opponent in the complex network that encompasses the country’s monarchy, military and political elite. Former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his political machine long seemed to be the force that could take on those entrenched interests. But no longer. A new generation of Thais, unencumbered by the past, is emerging to take up the challenge, writes Pavin Chachavalpongpun.

WHY WOULD THAILAND want to defeat its autocratic leaders? The simple answer is that democracy responds better to the needs of the people. What is more challenging, however, is to discuss why autocracy has persisted in Thailand. The flipside of the discussion is equally important: Why have Thais been unable to uproot autocracy? This short essay attempts to unravel these conundrums.

THAILAND’S ROYAL DEMOCRACY
Thailand’s political development has travelled a rocky path. Although the absolute monarchy was abolished in 1932, the royal institution has remained fundamental to Thai political life. In fact, the arrival of King Bhumibol Adulyadej (1946-2016) was destined to change Thailand, and not necessarily for the benefit of democracy. Bhumibol was adamant in reviving royal political hegemony. In this process, he forged firm ties with the military. Together, they became the forceful political engine that drove Thailand for much of the second half of the twentieth century. The Cold War played its part in strengthening this monarchy-military alliance. The United States openly supported Bhumibol and a series of military regimes, an exercise put forward in the name of containing communism. The flourishing monarchy-military alliance served to entrench Thailand’s autocratic political system, and as a by-product, to undermine the development of Thai democracy.

How did this autocratic system manifest itself? The palace and the military successfully crafted King Bhumibol from an early age into an “alter-
native model of democracy.” In so doing, they intentionally obscured the fact that the king was supposed to be apolitical. Against the backdrop of the Thai constitution, Bhumibol’s periodic political interventions emerged as an acceptable political norm. It is vital to discuss “democracy” as defined by the palace, the military and Bhumibol, in particular. They frequently construed democracy as a system somewhat tainted by the self-interest of politicians. This was evident in many of the king’s speeches. He concentrated on the need to nurture “clean politics” as opposed to “immoral politics” characterized by rampant corruption, vote buying and the lack of transparency and accountability on the part of politicians. For example, on July 12, 1979, Bhumibol said at Chulalongkorn University, “Dishonest people will never contribute positively to society. Honorable people, on the contrary, can succeed and be of great benefit to all.”

In recent times, at the height of political turmoil, Bhumibol in his birthday speech in 2013 said, “All Thais should ... behave and perform our duties accordingly, our duty for the sake of the public, for stability, security for our nation of Thailand.” The royal court reinterpreted democracy based predominantly on the moral and righteous guidance of the king. Hence, not only did King Bhumibol represent an alternative kind of democracy, known as “royal democracy,” the reinterpretation also allowed him to flaunt his political power over politicians, and, at the same time, imprint his legitimacy in a series of royal political interventions.

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In 1980, King Bhumibol handpicked General Prem Tinsulanonda, a former army chief, as the prime minister, a position he held until 1988. As he stepped down from the premiership, Bhumibol appointed Prem to become the president of the Privy Council, the advisory body of the monarchy. By then, the network monarchy, a term coined by British scholar Duncan McCaige, steadfastly dominated Thai politics. The network consisted loosely of the palace, the military, senior bureaucrats, big businesses and middle-class royalists. This is a way to understand Thai politics as a kind of political network. The most powerful political network has been the network monarchy, at least from the 1980s until 2001 (the year that witnessed the rise of Thaksin Shinawatra). Prem was the “CEO” of the network monarchy. His role was to ensure the empowerment of the military in politics and to eliminate any perceived threats to the royal institution. The network monarchy effectively created a political environment whereby civilian governments were to be kept weak and vulnerable; otherwise, they were to be removed in a military coup. The rise of Thaksin set up a challenge to royal hegemony. Winning landslide elections in 2001, Thaksin accumulated political power through assertive populist policies designed to strengthen rural residents long abandoned by the network monarchy. Thaksin’s second electoral victory in 2005 triggered a political crisis in which, in the context of this essay, the two political systems collided: democracy and autocracy.

For the first time, the conservative concept of autocracy, nestled legitimately within the royal hegemony of King Bhumibol, was seriously questioned by the popular democratic regime of Thaksin. It became an open competition between elective and non-elective institutions, the result of which saw the eventual crumbling of the Thaksin government. Facing imminent threats, the palace and the military employed their old trick in dealing with Thaksin — a coup. He was toppled in 2006. But Thailand in 2006 was a different place. The rise of the rural populism, made possible by Thaksin’s successful socio-economic policies, emerged as a persistent disloyal opposition to the network monarchy. It was the beginning of a long crisis during which the autocratic forces increasingly intensified their ruthlessness against their enemies.

For a brief moment, the royalist and military elite were convinced that they would be able to uproot Thaksin’s influence in politics. In the aftermath of the 2006 coup, they installed a military government and allowed a general election to take place a year later. But they were wrong. Thaksin’s proxies returned to politics, first under Samak Sundaravej and later Somchai Wongsawat. Both governments, in 2008, were forced to step down at the behest of the pro-monarchy Constitutional Court. This was testament to the use of the judiciary to eliminate political opponents. “Judicial coup” became a new term in the Thai political dictionary. It revealed the dangerous politicization of the judiciary, which performed as loyal members of the network monarchy. Following the departure of Thaksin-endorsed regimes, the Democrat Party was able to form a minority government in a backroom deal brokered by the military. From 2008 to 2011, it was evident that the Democrat government worked on behalf of the conservative elite. When the supporters of the Shinawatras in the so-called red-shirt camp demanded the resignation of Abhisit Vejjajiva, the prime minister and leader of the Democrat Party, many were killed in a brutal crackdown in the center of Bangkok in May 2010. Almost 100 people perished and...
2,500 were injured. This incident was considered the most violent act committed by the Thai state since the Black May event of 1992.

In 2011, a new election took place. Thaksin, who had never given up on political power, this time nominated his youngest sister, Yingluck, to contest the election. As expected, her party, Pheu Thai, won overwhelmingly and she led a government for the next three years. Yet her electoral victory coincided with greater uncertainty emerging inside the palace. King Bhumibol’s fast-declining health was signaling the end of his authoritative era. Suddenly, the network monarchy became anxious about what would come after Bhumibol’s departure. His son, Vajiralongkorn, the only heir apparent, was not loved among the supporters of Thaksin, nor by the members of the network monarchy. They feared that Vajiralongkorn would not be able to defend the political interests they had long invested in the monarchy. Arguably, the anxiety drove them to stage a coup against Yingluck in 2014 to make sure that the imminent royal transition would go ahead smoothly and under the watchful eye of the military. What followed next was the installation of a new kind of political infrastructure to safeguard the autocratic system long enjoyed by the conservative elite.

WHY MUST AUTOCRACY BE BEATEN?

In the past several decades, the network monarchy attempted to install a new concept of democracy in which the king competed fiercely with elective institutions. The idea of royal democracy, while it is alien elsewhere, took root in Thailand, bringing about a unique situation whereby democracy was supposedly protected by autocratic rule. But the Bhumibol era was over and members of the network monarchy began a process of re-autocratization through different means. In the aftermath of the coup against Yingluck, they wrote a new constitution which, unlike its predecessors, is more intrinsically non-democratic. The new constitution gives greater power to the courts and independent agencies, which has in practical terms weakened the role of elected officials and strengthened military control over politics. Under the new charter too, the Senate is to be appointed by the junta. The prime minister does not need to be elected. Hence, Prayuth Chan-ocha, the general who led the coup against Yingluck, comfortably returned to the premiership for the second time after the 2019 elections. Meanwhile, the military seems to have found its place in the new reign of Vajiralongkorn. The new king personally handpicked General Apirat Kongsompong to be army chief, a move that reconsolidated the traditional ties between the monarchy and the military. On his first day at work, Apirat told the media that he would not hesitate to stage another coup should Thailand’s political crisis refuse to subside.4

Surprising many, King Vajiralongkorn has shown assertiveness in politics, contrary to previous analyses that predicted he would show little interest. Even before the death of his father, Vajiralongkorn reorganized the power structure within the walls of the palace. He took a large portion of power from the hands of the Privy Council so as to manage royal affairs himself. For example, he requested the constitution be amended so that he could reside in Munich long-term without having to appoint a regent at home. He strove to control certain regiments of the army, making sure that powerful members of the military would be taking his commands and supporting his throne. He approved a pro-junta political party, Palang Pracharath, to form a government after the elections, as well as endorsed the second premiership of Prayuth.

In dealing with disloyal opposition, Vajiralongkorn’s tactics proved to be ruthless compared with the more subtle style of his father. For example, the new rising opposition, the Future Forward Party, with its republican leanings, had been a target of the state since its inception. Accused of being anti-monarchist, the party was finally disbanded at the order of the royalist court in February 2020. The court ruled that a loan from its leader, self-made billionaire Thanaorn Jungurungreangkit, to the party was illegal. But harassing enemies of the monarchy does not stop at Thailand’s border. At least eight anti-monarchist refugees seeking exile in neighboring countries have been killed in the past few years. All sought refuge in Laos and continued their clandestine anti-monarchist campaigns. Their deaths, although widely reported in the international media, were ignored by the Thai press and the public.

But the rise of autocracy in Thailand is not without its challenges. Coming with it is the rise of alternative forces in the democratic camp. The birth of the Future Forward Party has proven to be a thorn in the side of royal absolutism. Although Thanaorn was careful not to be portrayed as anti-monarchy, a crime that could see him locked up for up to 15 years under the draconian lese-majesty law, he has proposed a series of daring policies targeting the core of the establishment. For example, he has campaigned for the demilitarization of politics, a reduction in the defense budget and the abolition of conscription. The party knows that hitting at the military is a first step to challenging royal prerogatives. But more crucial is the fact that the party has exploited the proliferation of social media to replace the old set of political thinking with a new kind, particularly among the young.

The younger generation is a key, among other factors, that could be used to counter rising autocracy. Thai teenagers today have no recollection of the greatness of King Bhumibol and are able to sidestep state propaganda on the monarchy and its portrayal as an alternative source of democracy. Riding on the wave of social media, this younger generation has been exposed to news that would previously be inaccessible in Thailand regarding their king. The photos of Vajiralongkorn strolling in Munich in a tiny tank-top with fake tattoos serve to erode the previously sacred image of the Thai monarchy; this has become a source of royal de-sacralization of Vajiralongkorn today among Thai youth. They have voiced their frustrations at the royal privileges that have caused inconvenience to the public. For example, the blocking of streets for the royal parade was viewed by Thai youth with great disdain. They took to Twitter cursing difficulties in their everyday lives caused by the royal family. Little by little, Thai youth have begun to realize that autocracy must be beaten in order to bring about a fairer and more just society. Most of the younger generation are supporting the Future Forward Party. One can imagine the party working with the country’s youth to beat the royal autocracy in the years ahead. The ongoing protests among Thai universities across the country, including even some high schools, are testimony of the growing voices of Thai youth.

Here we go again, a society that is divided along royal lines. Thaksin might not pose the greatest threat today. But for the pro-monarchists, Thanaorn and his supporters represent new faces of enemies that must be eliminated. Unless Thailand is able to beat autocracy, its political crisis will persist, and potentially become dangerous.

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