

# Of Monarchs and Military Men: The Political Pathologies that Undermine Democracy in Burma and Thailand

By Kelley Currie

In late April of this year, villagers foraging for mushrooms in the southern Thai jungles stumbled across a filthy, ragged, and emaciated man who had been left to die at an abandoned human-trafficking camp. Authorities investigating the camp found 32 gravesites containing the remains of other migrants and dilapidated bamboo cages where the living were held. The lone survivor told Thai authorities a horrific story of fleeing repression in Burma and of dangerous illicit travel on sea and land, packed into ships and trucks with hundreds of other men, women, and children. They were fed starvation rations and provided no shelter, sanitation or health care. In the camps, he and his fellow captives were worked, starved, beaten, and raped until relatives in Malaysia or back home were able to raise thousands of dollars in ransom. If one of them died on a ship, they were thrown overboard. If they died in the jungle, they were thrown in the pit.

The narrator of this horror story was a Rohingya, a member of a long persecuted Muslim minority group in western Burma. The camp and its mass grave were on a well-worn smuggling route taking desperate Rohingyas from Burma's Rakhine State and squalid refugee camps in southern Bangladesh, through Thailand and ultimately to Malaysia.

Since a 2012 outbreak of communal violence targeting Rohingyas in Burma, the trafficking business had been booming. Subsequent official persecution intended to make Burma as inhospitable to the Rohingya as possible was working as planned: more than 120,000 Rohingyas have fled Burma since December 2012. Since February 2015, when Burmese authorities rescinded the temporary identity cards that had been the last shred of official recognition for thousands of Rohingyas, more have fled than in all of 2014.

For years, migration and human rights NGOs have warned regional and donor governments of the deteriorating situation facing the growing flood of Rohingya refugees. For their part, Thai authorities had done little to stop the traffickers operating from their territory and they were less interested in engaging Burma on the root causes of the outflow. But after regional media reported a series of gruesome incidents involving the abuse and death of migrants and exposed official complicity in trafficking, the previously indifferent Thai junta began cracking down just as the number of people fleeing Burma and Bangladesh surged.

When Thai authorities launched their crackdown, the traffickers initially adjusted tactics and began holding people on barges at sea, moving them

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to land only after securing onward passage to Malaysia. After the discovery of the mass grave led to increased enforcement efforts, the traffickers simply abandoned their human cargo at sea if they could not sell them quickly enough. Thousands were left floating in the middle of the Andaman Sea and Indian Ocean in rickety ships, with little or no food, water, or fuel. When these “floating coffins” began drifting into Thai, Indonesian, and Malaysian territorial waters, they towed them back out to sea. But after local and international outcry over their callous treatment of the Rohingya “boat people”, these countries took a more humanitarian approach. Likewise, after an initially passive reaction, the United States stepped up pressure on regional countries to help the Rohingya and announced increased assistance.

Authorities in Burma, however, refused to take any responsibility for the situation and denied these individuals were of Burmese origin. When Thailand announced a May 29<sup>th</sup> regional conference on the crisis, Burmese authorities refused to attend unless other participants refrained from using the term “Rohingya” or pointing fingers at Burmese policies as a root cause of the crisis. Thailand and other participants agreed to these absurd conditions without much resistance. The resulting conference was surreal Kabuki theatre in which participants cited the need to work on the root causes of the “migration event” without articulating who was migrating, from where or why. As a consequence, the immediate humanitarian crisis began to ease, but

a durable solution for the Rohingya remained beyond discussion.

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When Burma joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1997, Thailand was the most democratic country in the regional grouping. Today, that is no longer the case. While all original members of ASEAN supported Burmese membership, Thailand also saw it as a means to help moderate the Burmese junta’s behavior and encourage reform. Instead, the absence of consistent, liberal Thai leadership within ASEAN over the ensuing 18 years impaired its development as an organization and weakened the influence of its “democratic caucus.” This latest crisis—which saw three founding ASEAN states yield on an issue that directly impacted them in order to pacify immoral behavior by one of its weakest members—clearly exposed the ongoing dysfunction at the heart of ASEAN.

This humanitarian and political disaster also again laid bare the pathologies currently impeding Burma and Thailand on their paths toward stability and democracy. The Rohingya issue made the leap from local problem to regional crisis because of a nearly perfect storm of

state failure in Burma and in Thailand. In the case of Burma, the underlying political pathology is the military's dominant role in the country's politics, governance, economy, and culture. In Thailand, it is the monarchy's continued role in stunting the country's democratic development.

**Burma: From Democracy Denied to “Discipline Flourishing Democracy”**

When Burma began liberalizing in 2010, many thoughtful Burmese democrats expressed concerns about becoming “another Cambodia”: a donor (and/or China) dependent, electoral authoritarian backwater. Today, these same people are equally concerned about not emulating Thailand: a country with the superficial trappings of economic development and democracy, but which is actually controlled by an elite with shallow commitments to liberal values. (There is also a different, darker fear put forward by Burma's Buddhist nationalists, that democracy and liberalism will cause Burma to follow Thailand in debasing its Buddhist culture.) Among Burmese democrats, the seemingly cyclical military interventions to “fix” Thailand's democratic failures point up the dangers of contemplating a similar long-term role for Burma's military.

Since the high water mark of Burma's reforms in 2012, the Burmese military, or Tatmadaw, has resisted relinquishing further political and economic prerogatives to nascent democratic institutions. This resistance has manifested itself in a

number of ways, including: blocking constitutional reform, instigating or expanding conflicts that reinforce its self-styled role as national savior, and securing economic interests via interlocking relationships with the business elite. Likewise, the military has continued its patronage of senior Buddhist monks and is believed to provide sustenance to virulently nationalist Buddhist networks that have operated since 2012. Finally, the military has at times given the impression it might be politically up-for-grabs. This has led to awkward and unsuccessful attempts by Aung San Suu Kyi and the democratic opposition to cultivate the military as an ally, despite its role as the democrats' tormentor from 1988 to 2010. The National League for Democracy (NLD) and other democratic forces explain this strange courtship by pointing out that, given its predominant role, they can ill-afford to isolate or provoke the military if they hope to push a democratic transition forward.

**Thailand: “Apres Moi, le Deluge”**

While the situation in Thailand may appear more stable, that appearance masks a deeply challenged polity. All aspects of Thai society have become increasingly polarized along political lines and this polarization is directly related to the role that the institution of the monarchy has played in stunting Thailand's democratic development. The palace has warped Thailand's democratic institutions through what scholar Duncan MacCargo calls “network monarchy”: a complex, deeply rooted web of power

that maintains and legitimizes the country's institutional monarchy as the key mediator in society. This network monarchy has fused itself to all aspects of Thai society, occupying a unique and unrivalled position. As part of the self-perpetuation imperative, it has made a state project of entrenching its values. This process has crowded out key democratic tenets, particularly freedom of expression, as anyone who has fallen afoul of Thailand's regressive *lèse-majesté* laws knows. In this way, the monarchic institutions have undermined both official and societal institutions that democratic societies utilize to mediate conflict.

Thailand's current political polarization takes the form of a Bangkok-centered elite that is fluent in the language of liberalism, but has largely ignored the country's vast majority of lower income citizens, versus a neo-populist movement helmed by Thaksin Shinawatra, a leader with clear authoritarian tendencies. Both sides rely on patronage, corruption, and emotional cultural appeals to energize their supporters, but the populist movement has the numbers to ensure electoral success in any fairly run contest. This has placed it in conflict with the Thai military, which has historically represented the interests and acted at the behest of the palace. There have now been 12 coups in Thailand since 1932, with 2014's coup representing the second in less than a decade. Even though the military has consistently returned power to civilian officials, each coup has deepened the polarization.

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But the ability—if not the intention—of the monarchy to intervene in Thai politics has weakened over time. As the revered but dying King Bhumibol gives way to a successor with considerably less legitimacy, the underlying political polarization in the country is increasingly likely to come to a head. The conflagrations between the two main political camps have grown more violent and the resulting periods of military rule less liberal. Because the monarchy's role as mediating institution has stunted the growth of more democratic mediating institutions, Thai political observers are understandably terrified about what happens after the king's death.

### **Treating the Disease, Not the Symptoms**

When it announced the “pivot” to Asia, the Obama administration declared its intent to strengthen U.S. ties with all the countries of the region. The 2010 reforms in Burma created new opportunities to fulfill that rhetoric. Meanwhile, Thailand's 2014 military coup complicated efforts on that front. In both cases, however, the Obama administration has de-emphasized democratic values in its policy approach in the misguided belief that this will facilitate improved relations.

In Burma, the Obama administration replaced a policy of principled

dissociation with one of unprincipled engagement. We need to rebalance this. Pragmatism in the service of a transactional relationship may seem rational in the short term, but Thailand's experience shows this is ultimately dangerous for Burma and for the US. Our largely transactional relationship with Thailand left us blind to the underlying rot in Thai political institutions and dependent on a dying institution for stability. Declaring premature victory in Thailand's democratization process facilitated the larger failure to deepen democracy beyond the Bangkok façade. Allowing the Tatmadaw to brand itself as the protector of a self-styled "discipline flourishing democracy" would be a disastrous outcome for Burma. In Thailand, mediating societal institutions can counterbalance the military just enough to keep it from seriously abusing its power. While these societal institutions are weaker than they should be, they are more mature and deeply rooted than their Burmese counterparts.

In the interim period needed for these institutions to develop in Burma, the U.S. and other partners should reinvigorate their principled stance on democratic values, institutions, and practices. This does not mean reimposing suspended sanctions, but rather utilizing existing mechanisms to isolate bad actors. The U.S. should lead in rebuilding the old coalition that long pushed for democracy and human rights in Burma. At a minimum, western countries should stop putting a thumb on the authorities' side of the scale through the false equivalency of

"neutral" engagement that privileges government-to-government interaction. Better still, we should be unequivocal about expectations, and tie them to objective standards of democratic self-governance, international law, and human rights. This means holding the Burmese government accountable for its policies and actions and creating space for democrats to find their way forward. It also means standing firm on the imperative of an appropriate role for the military in a democracy, rather than trying to sweet talk the Tatmadaw into incrementally ceding power. We should put commercial and security engagement on the backburner until the reform process is moving toward a more genuinely democratic outcome and take a more circumspect approach on bilateral aid and engagement by international financial institutions and other diplomatic tools.

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On Thailand, the way forward is more complicated and nuanced. Thailand will continue to struggle with its internal polarization and must find its own solutions to these problems, but outside friends are not doing the country any favors by ignoring the root cause. The monarchy in Thailand is an increasingly anachronistic institution, and the impending death of the king will further weaken its



legitimacy at a time political polarization is deepening and the chasm between Thais' democratic expectations and reality is widening. Again, the role of the military is key but important contextual and internal cultural differences create far greater opportunity for it to play a positive role in Thailand's democratic development. The U.S. and others have already built significant relationships with this military and there is greater potential than with Burma to leverage these relationships in a way that does not undermine democratic values or processes. Our diplomats should be talking to the military now about the post-king landscape, rather than tiptoeing around it as we tend to do. While it may feel culturally transgressive, our foreignness gives us an excuse to break these taboos and thereby create some space for Thai interlocutors to engage in a more healthy dialogue. In the post-Wikileaks era, it is hard to reassure allies that they are in a safe space, but it is imperative to find a way.

While the Thai military has a more credible claim as a guardian of democracy than Burma's, this remains an ill-suited role. It is important to strengthen those mediating societal institutions that are better suited to address political polarization over the long term. A minimal commitment of resources here could yield important

dividends. Giving the National Endowment for Democracy, rather than USAID, a stronger mandate to work in Thailand is one way to start. Again, creating safe spaces for conversations about the future, in both an international and regional context, will be key. Giving these organizations and individuals the kind of support that can protect them from the abuse of *lèse-majesté* laws is also critical. Finally, working through regional partners who would benefit from a less self-absorbed, more outward looking Thailand, provides another avenue for dialogue and cooperation.

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In both cases, unless policymakers at the domestic, regional and international level are prepared to deal with uncomfortable truths and reshape their policies accordingly, the long-term situation is unlikely to improve on its own. It is not too late for a course correction in the "rebalance"—one that places support for genuine democracy at the center—but the longer we wait, the harder it will be and the more serious the consequences of failure.