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The End of the Obama Era in Asia

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
and Nicola Mocci

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THAILAND 2016: THE DEATH OF KING BHUMIBOL AND THE DEEPENING
OF THE POLITICAL CRISIS

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A military coup in May 2014 was the last turn in a political crisis that has affected the country since the beginning of the century. As the country grew richer and its society more demanding, a quite liberal constitution had been approved in 1997, leading to a higher degree of democratization. However, the regional economic crisis 1997-98 immediately tested the new political framework as the country became more politically divided and socially polarized. In 2016 the military junta ruling the country succeeded in having a new constitutional project approved by a referendum, paving the way for the return of the country to a system of semi-democracy in which the royalist elites and the army will continue to maintain a fundamental political influence.

As in previous occasions, the military coup had been presented as a needed step to protect the monarchy and the country, restoring peace and order. With the health of the old King Bhumibol becoming increasingly frail, however, it was evident that a major concern of the political forces then in power was to govern the royal succession. The death of King Bhumibol on 13 October was a watershed event for Thailand, putting an end to a reign that had lasted over seventy years. The advent to the throne of Maha Vajiralongkorn opened a new era in the country as the new King did not seem to have the same level of people support enjoyed by his father. This being the situation, the role of the monarchy – so far the ultimate arbiter in political life and a major economic player – may eventually change.

A series of bombings, including in the royal sea resort of Hua Hin in August, proved that the problems in the three southern provinces with a predominantly Muslim population have not been solved. The country continues to face regional divides, which also include a strong resentment against the Bangkok elites in the northern and north-eastern regions where the deposed premier Thaksin Shinawatra continues to enjoy a solid consensus.

1. The king is dead, long life the king

The death of King Bhumibol Adulyadej on 13 October 2016 marked the end of an era for Thailand. The king, also known as Rama IX of the Chakri dynasty, had ascended the throne in 1946 and was the world's longest reigning monarch. As already anticipated in *Asia Maior 2015*, such was the high status achieved by the king during his long reign that his departure left a void in Thai politics and society that will be difficult for his heir to address. This is of particular concern given the ongoing political crisis in

the country.¹ The king was perceived by many as a symbol of stability in a country deeply polarized and since 2014 ruled by a military junta. By large extent, much of the recent Thai history can be understood as an attempt by the different power groups to prepare for the king's passing and the intricacies of a complex royal succession.

The 88-year-old king had long been in poor health and had spent most of the previous years at Siriraj Hospital in Bangkok. In February 2016, the Royal Household Bureau announced that the His Majesty suffered high fever for an unknown infection.² In May, the clinical conditions further deteriorated and the old king undergone an intervention to remove excess fluid that was putting pressure on his brain and spinal cord.³ The news that the king was in agony emerged on 12 October and a large crowd of good wishers gathered at the Siriraj Hospital, while the Crown Prince returned from his residence in Germany.⁴ Immediately after the announcement of the king's death one year period of mourning was declared by the government. Uncertainties about the succession, however, were immediately dispelled by the Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha: when he announced officially to the nation the passing of King Bhumibol, he also made clear that the Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn – the defunct king only son – would be the new sovereign. This announcement and its timing were notable as uncertainties about the succession to King Bhumibol had been well-known. For years, for example, rumours had suggested that Princess Sirindhorn, the highly popular, unmarried daughter of the king, could become the new monarch instead of the quite controversial brother. A constitutional reform in 1974 allowed female succession, at least theoretically making her eligible to the throne. These rumours about possible alternatives to the crown prince had acquired substance when WikiLeaks revealed that three senior members of the Privy Council (the group of powerful advisers appointed by the king) – namely former prime minister and council president General Prem Tinsulanonda, former prime minister Anand Panyarachun, and Air Chief Marshall Siddhi Savetsila – had expressed to the US Ambassador their preference for an alternative to Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn. According to what reported by the US diplomat, the three officers openly criticized the crown prince life style and suggested that he may have maintained a close relation with Thaksin Shinawatra, the former prime minister deposed by a

1. Pavin Chachavalpongpun, 'Thailand 2015: Anxiety over the royal succession in the post coup 2014', *Asia Maior 2015*, pp. 229-243.

2. 'Thai Palace Says 88-Year-Old King Bhumibol Has Unknown Infection', *Bloomberg*, 16 February 2016.

3. 'Doctors drain fluids from Thai king's brain, spinal cord', *Associated Press*, 21 May 2016.

4. 'Outpouring of support for «unstable» Thai King', *CNN*, 12 October 2016.

military coup in 2006.⁵ Notwithstanding the reservations voiced by these senior leaders and the large popularity of Princess Sirindhorn, however, there was never a hint that King Bhumibol had decided to review the decision taken in 1972, when he had appointed Prince Vajiralongkorn as his heir. As the king grew older and more frail the possibility of a change in the line of succession became more remote, thus forcing the different power groups to reassess their position.

In no other country in modern history the role of the monarchy had become so prominent as in Thailand under King Bhumibol. With time, the late sovereign arrived to be seen as the embodiment of a *dharmaraja* or dharma king, that is, an ideal righteous king who rules in accordance with the precepts for Theravada Buddhism kingship.⁶ Even his frail health in recent years contributed to increase the charisma of a king presented by royalists as detached from earthly interests, above political factions, and fatherly concerned in national development and harmony. While the legal powers of the Thai monarchy have become largely symbolic since the advent of constitutional monarchy in 1932, the enormous prestige and moral authority enjoyed by King Bhumibol entrusted him vast influence over national politics. It is in the nature of the role performed by the late king – in virtue of a personal charisma that was above and beyond what guaranteed by his royal prerogatives – that lays the complexity of the succession.

King Bhumibol Adulyadej ascended the throne at a time in which the role of the monarchy had been weakened by the 1932 bloodless coup that had introduced a constitutional monarchy. The king was the young, American-born, second son of a commoner mother, who eventually was crowned king when his older brother was killed in a gunfire accident. Furthermore, post-World War II Thailand was dominated by the conflicts among different civilian and military factions. These challenges, however, contributed to strengthening the profile of the new king. Palace advisers and military-led governments saw in the new monarch a viable nationalist symbol to be promoted to strengthen their own influence. Especially since the 1950s, when the country became a key American ally in the war against Communism in Indochina, it became vital for the armed forces to increase their national legitimacy. The army and the conservative elites, with financial backing from the United States, actively converged in restoring the monarchy's prestige and wealth.⁷ King Bhumibol played an important role himself in renovating the standing of the monarchy through his frequent visits around the country, including the most remote areas, and his promotion of agricultural

5. 'WikiLeaks cables: Thai leaders doubt suitability of prince to become king', *The Guardian*, 15 December 2010.

6. Kobkua Suwannathat-Pian, *Kings, Country and Constitutions: Thailand's Political Development 1932-2000*, London and New York: Routledge, 2013, p. 21.

7. 'Twilight of the king: After the ailing monarch goes, what next?' *The Economist*, 23 July 2016.

development schemes. Patronage of numerous charity initiatives remained through the years a powerful instrument to fortify the relationship between the monarchy and the local population. During the long kingdom of Bhumibol the significance of the monarchy in the Thai political, economic and social life evolved to the point that it became the centre and the symbol of a much wider web of interests that associated the military, the aristocracy and the economic elites. In this sense, the Thai monarchy can be understood not as a person or nor even an institution, but as a network centred on royal advisers in the privy council (appointed by the king), with a direct influence on the army, bureaucracy, and the judiciary.⁸ The power of the monarchy also reflected in an enormous wealth administered by the Palace through the Crown Property Bureau (CPB). This Bureau manages properties and investments in the order of US\$50 billion, is the biggest corporate group in Thailand and one the biggest landholders in Bangkok.⁹ Contrary to the other constitutional monarchies, the wealth of the Crown is entirely outside the government control and can be used at the complete discretion of the monarchy. These enormous economic resources further strengthen the power of the monarchy over the country and create endless opportunities to galvanize the vast network of allies and clients. Here, however, also lays a possible challenge for the new king. The enormous concentration of wealth in the hands of the royal family has so far been accepted by the population due to King Bhumibol's the personal prestige. Things may change should the monarchy not maintain a similar level of support in a country in which growing income polarization is increasingly resented by a large part of the public opinion.

In political terms the role of the monarchy, promoted as an institution above the mundane conflicts among politicians (often tainted by corruption), became a smokescreen used by the Army to intervene – repeatedly through military coups – to restore order in the country in the name of superior national interests. Although the Army always presents itself as the defender of the monarchy, the royal support of its initiatives is not automatic also in consideration of the frequent rifts within the army itself. In some cases, King Bhumibol intervened to reinstate his role of final arbiter of Thai political life by limiting the direct political role of the army. The most notable case occurred in 1992, when the King put an end to the bloody battles between pro-democracy demonstrators and the security forces of the army-led government, eventually forcing the prime minister to step down. However, years later the King played a reverse role. In fact it is generally agreed that, because only a royal sanction may guarantee the success of a coup, the King himself – or his entourage, obviously with the King's assent – backed

8. Duncan McCargo, 'Network Monarchy and Legitimacy Crises in Thailand', *The Pacific Review* 18 (4), December 2005.

9. Tom Felix Joehnk, 'The Thai Monarchy and Its Money', *The New York Times*, 3 December 2015.

the military interventions in 2006 and 2014.¹⁰ These military coups and the consequent escalation of a dramatic political crisis significantly tainted the image of the King.

The coups of 2006 and 2014 took place in the new political context that had come into being since 2001, when Thai politics was dominated by the rise of a «new man», Thaksin Shinawatra. Thaksin Shinawatra was a billionaire with close connections with sectors of the economic establishment, who presented himself as the champion of the impoverished north and as an alternative to conservative élites. He achieved such a wide popularity to be able to win twice the national elections and, once overthrown by a military coup on 19 September 2006 and forced to go in exile, to continue exerting a prominent political influence from afar. The 2006 coup against Thaksin was preceded by wide street demonstrations organised by the Yellow Shirts, a conservative and ultra-royalist movement that adopted yellow – the colour of the king – as its emblem. Once Thaksin's allies won the national elections in 2008, the resulting government was dissolved by the Constitutional Court through a «white coup». This brought about in the emergence of a new mass movement: the Red Shirts. Their protests escalated in spring 2010 but, eventually, were brutally repressed. The demonstrations came to an end on 19 May 2010, when the Red Shirt encampment in the centre of Bangkok was attacked by the police with dozens of casualties and many leaders of the movement being arrested. A notable incident a few months later revealed how much the antagonism between the two mass movements and the repression of the Red Shirts had directly affected the public image of the King. During a rally organized by the Red Shirts on 19 May 2010 to commemorate the four years since the 2006 coup and the four months since the violent repression of their movement, a number of people wrote anti-royalist graffiti on nearby buildings and even chanted slogan insulting the King.¹¹ This incident suggests that a part of the population had ceased to see King Bhumibol as an impartial, unifying figure. A new military coup in 2014 against the government formed by Yingluck Shinawatra, sister of Thaksin, further exacerbated the political divide and increased the discontent against the royalist-army alliance.¹²

The complex interaction between the monarchy and Thaksin Shinawatra also casts its shadow on the royal succession. An alleged proximity between Thaksin and the Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn had become a major concern for the royalist elites and possibly motivated the army to seize power twice in less than a decade. After the coup in 2014 there was a clear attempt

10. 'Twilight of the king: After the ailing monarch goes, what next?', *The Economist*, 23 July 2016.

11. Serhat Únaldi, 'Working Towards the Monarchy and its Discontents: Anti-royal Graffiti in Downtown Bangkok', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 44 (3), 2014.

12. 'Thailand coup gets King Adulyadej approval as junta dissolves senate', *The Guardian*, 25 May 2014.

by the army-led government to boost the image of the crown prince as a realignment had probably occurred. With Vajiralongkorn likely to become soon the new king, the army and the royalist elites had to show him their unconditional support. The day of the king's death, however, was marked by a rather surprising development. According to the constitution, the new king ascends the throne accepting the investiture received by the Parliament, which in turn recognizes the new monarch, identified by the Privy Council on the basis of the succession law and the expressed will of the previous king. As Maha Vajiralongkorn was the only son of the defunct king and had been appointed Crown Prince in 1972, there were no possible doubts about who to name as the new king. The National Legislative Assembly was summoned for a special session for the evening of 13 October so that, as the tradition required, the throne would not remain vacant. Before the parliamentary session, however, a new communique by the prime minister Prayut Chan-o-cha informed that the Crown Prince had accepted to become the new king, but had asked to postpone his proclamation to have the time to mourn the defunct father together with the nation.¹³ The National Legislative Assembly simply met to pay respect to the late king with 9 minutes of silence and then the session was adjourned. The precise reasons for this delay did not emerge. Only three days later, nevertheless, the government confirmed that there were no changes in the roadmap of the royal succession, which would take place after 15 days of mourning.¹⁴ As planned, Maha Vajiralongkorn ascended the throne on 1 December 2016, accepting the invitation formulated by the National Legislative Assembly the previous day.¹⁵

A severe *lèse-majesté* law does not allow any public discussion about the monarchy and anything that can be perceived as an insult or even a criticism of the king and his family is harshly punished. The enforcement of this draconian law has become particularly strict since the 2014 coup, possibly in preparation of the royal succession. In the past the law prevented debates on the role of the monarchy in Thai society but could be used with some leniency given the wide popularity of King Bhumibol – and often the King pardoned those who had been condemned. In recent times, however, the law came to be used to prevent any public debate about the figure of the Crown Prince. The new king is 64 and until recently seemed to be scarcely interested in the development projects patronized by his father. He received a military education and is a qualified civilian and fighter pilot. While King Bhumibol was seen as an austere monarch, detached from material concerns, the flamboyant Crown Prince in 1981 was described by his

13. 'Thai prime minister says crown prince has asked for delay in proclaiming him king so he can mourn with rest of nation', *Associated Press*, 13 October 2016.

14. 'Prayut: At least 15 days' mourning before royal succession', *Bangkok Post*, 18 October 2016.

15. 'Crown prince formally becomes Thailand's new king', *The Washington Post*, 1 December 2016.

own mother Queen Sirikit as «a bit of a Don Juan», who prefers to spend his weekends with beautiful women rather than performing duties.¹⁶ He married and divorced three times. First, in 1977, he married with a cousin from whom he had a daughter. Then, he became involved with a young actress with whom he had five children from 1979 to 1987. He married her in 1994 but two years later he publicly denounced her for adultery and disowned their four sons. Finally, he married a third wife in 2001 and had another son (who is likely to become the new Crown Prince). However, also this third marriage ended quite dramatically in 2014, when the Prince's third wife was stripped of her royal titles and nine relatives of her family (including her parents) were arrested with the accusation to have abused their connection with the royal family. To make the situation even more disquieting, a police officer associated with the Prince's third former wife's family died while in custody by falling out of a window.¹⁷

Through the years, rumours about possible connections between the Crown Prince and illegal business periodically emerged to taint the image of the heir to the throne.¹⁸ Even more problematic for the royalists and the conservative elites, however, were the reports of a possible association between Maha Vajiralongkorn and Thaksin Shinawatra. In spite of all this and since 2014, the military junta seems to have established a good cooperation with the Crown Prince, indicating that, if an association with Thaksin had really existed in the past, it was now superseded.

Given the strong personal charisma of the defunct sovereign, any royal succession would have been problematic. Even more so a succession with an heir that, at least up to his accession, seemed not to enjoy a strong popularity in the country. The challenge regarded not only, and even not so much, the new king *per se*, but the complex web of interests and powers that for many years had based their authority on the prestige of the monarchy. Keeping in mind these concerns allows to better understand the May 2014 coup and the subsequent events.

2. A new constitution – again

Two months ahead of the king's death, there was another major political development in the country. On 7 August 2016 a referendum approved a new constitution drafted by a panel of experts appointed by the military junta. Once ratified by the National Legislative Assembly the new constitution will become the 20th in the last 85 years and the 3rd in ten years.

16. 'Profile: Thailand's new King Vajiralongkorn', *BBC*, 1 December 2016.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.* This report published by the BBC is now under investigation for *lèse-majesté* and its reporters may face a condemn for up to 30 years. The problem seems to regard the Thai version rather than its English original.

Before examining the draft of this new constitution and the referendum, it could be appropriate to analyse in brief the historical process that has led to this result. Until the 1990s Thailand remained a country in which democracy was somehow constrained by a rather authoritarian legal framework. Things changed in the 1990s when a combination of factors pushed for a liberalization of political life. Pressure from different sectors of society converged on the request for a more progressive constitution. After failed attempts by the Parliament to amend the existing constitution, in 1996 a Constitution Drafting Assembly of 99 members was formed, with the majority of these members elected by the different provinces and a few legal experts appointed by the Parliament. This constitution was eventually approved by a large majority of the Parliament in 1997 in the midst of the regional Asian economic crisis, when pressure for reforms became particularly strong. The 1997 constitution produced a major transformation in Thai politics: for the first time both houses of the parliament were directly elected; the electoral system strengthened national parities and made vote buying more difficult; a clearer separation between the executive and the legislative powers was promoted; a number of human rights were explicitly recognized.¹⁹

The 1997 constitution did change the political life – perhaps in a direction that had not been anticipated by many of the actors that had supported its approval. In the dramatic years immediately following the regional economic crisis a new political party – the Thai Rak Thai («Thais love Thais») – emerged. This party was guided by media tycoon leader Thaksin Shinawatra on the basis of a populist platform mobilizing the impoverished peasants in the north and northeast of the country together with those sectors of society that had so far felt excluded by political representation. For the first time, Thailand not only had a government able to last for an entire legislature but also to win the elections again with a growing margin. The government combined progressive policies (such as an inclusive healthcare reform) with authoritarian measures (e.g., extra-judiciary killings of suspected drug dealers). Eventually, the power of Thaksin came to be perceived by the royalist elites and by the Bangkok bourgeoisie as an intolerable threat. After a period of turmoil in the streets of the capital, in 2006 the military intervened with a bloodless coup, as usual motivated with the need to protect the monarchy.²⁰ In only a few weeks the constitution was modified so to contrast the power of Thaksin and his party. When new elections were held, however, even if Thaksin was not allowed to be a candidate, his party won again. The reformed constitution allowed the dissolution of the pro-Thaksin government through a «white coup». However, new elections in 2011 saw

19. James R. Klein, 'The Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, 1997: A Blueprint for Participatory Democracy', Asian Foundation Working Paper Series, Working Paper nr. 8, 1998.

20. Erik Martinez Kuhonta, 'The Paradox of Thailand's 1997 «People's Constitution»: Be Careful What You Wish For', *Asian Survey*, 48 (3), 2008, pp. 373-392.

again the victory of the pro-Thaksin party and resulted in his sister Yingluck becoming the new prime minister. Again, the political conflict turned violent. When, in 2014, there was an attempt to remove Yingluck Shinawatra from government through legal chicanery she called new elections. Knowing that she could have won again, the army took the power with a new coup.

As we have seen already, the urgency of a military intervention was largely motivated by the prospect of a royal succession in the next future. Probably also for this reason the army decided to intervene more aggressively than in 2006. Critics, including some connected with the pro-establishment Democrat Party, have accused junta chief and Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-o-cha of an excessively authoritarian style, which contributed to increase the hostility of the population. Supporters pointed out the need to enforce reforms before returning the country to democratic rule with new elections officially due for 2017. The legal instrument used by government to impose its decision, known as Article 44, was renamed by the public as «dictator law». Indeed, Prayuth relied on this emergency legislation over 50 times since seizing power for decision regarding a large spectrum of issues, from power plants to health.²¹

The military-led government not only intervened with new policies in the different sectors of the state administration, but also worked to reform the institutional system so that the military and the royalist elites could continue to exert a dominant control over public life. The instrument for such a long-term influence was a new constitution that reversed many of the innovative and pro-democracy aspects of the constitution approved in 1997 – that is, the army tried to make up for the «wasted coup» of 2006, which had failed to neutralized Thaksin power.²²

A draft of a new constitution was rejected by the army-appointed National Reform Council in September 2015. This draft had been widely criticized by all political forces. However, an even more important reason for its rejection seems to have been the will to postpone future elections – which could only be held with a new constitution and after the approval of a number of implementation laws.²³ To stem national and international criticisms, Prayuth successively indicated that the roadmap for elections in 2017 was still valid, while a new constitutional project was finalized on 29 January 2016 by a new drafting body appointed by the military junta.²⁴ This new version, however, maintained many of the problematic aspects of the previous draft

21. 'Use of «dictator law» rises in Thailand as junta's reforms falter', *Reuters*, 3 February 2016.

22. 'Why does Thailand keep changing its constitution?', *The Economist*, 12 September 2016.

23. 'Thailand constitution: Military's council rejects draft', *BBC*, 6 September 2015.

24. Rob Edens, 'The Trouble with Thailand's New Constitution', *The Diplomat*, 26 February 2016.

and could at best be considered a framework for a semi-democracy. This new draft received a bi-partisan disapproval: both the Pheu Thai party of Yingluck Shinawatra and its main rival, the Democrat Party of former premier Abhisit Vejjajiva, denounced the project for its authoritarian nature. However, the drafting committee and the junta rejected these criticisms, making clear that they considered the country's parties rather as a nuisance to be curtailed than the building blocks of a stable democratic order.²⁵

The role and the composition of the Senate was one of the most controversial aspects of the new constitution. For a transition period of 5 years this house would be entirely appointed – *de facto* by the military junta – while at the same time this same house would be given more power and responsibilities. The Senate will name judges of the Constitutional Court, will review the selection of cabinet members and senior bureaucracy, will have the power to name a Premier if the Parliament (the elected house of representatives and the appointed Senate) fails to find a majority.²⁶ The role of the Senate is expected to be further enhanced by the fact that the constitution was designed with the aim to weaken national parties and to return to a system of small parties built around local leaders in which political fragmentation allowed the royalist elite to better protect its interests.

Another remarkable clause allows a National Reform Steering Assembly composed of military leaders and other junta loyalists to seize the power from the government when it feels the need to restore the order. This clause was defined by *The Wall Street Journal* as a «built-in coup mechanism».²⁷

A referendum on the new constitution was held on 7 August 2016. Campaign against the proposed draft was declared illegal and a number of people were arrested – risking up to 10 years of jail for possessing or distributing leaflets inviting to vote no.²⁸ Furthermore, the government rejected the request of independent observers to monitor the vote.²⁹ Eventually the turnout was around 55%, well-below the desired target for the junta, who saw in the referendum an important way to give legitimacy to its coup. A majority of 61% of the voters, however, approved the project.³⁰

The formal approval of the new constitution and the adoption of a set of new laws needed to implement it was then demanded to the National Legislative Assembly. Fears that the royal succession would imply a postponement of the new election to after the late king's funeral and the new king corona-

25. *Ibid.*

26. 'Thailand unveils new constitution draft to public', *Deutsche Welle*, 29 March 2016;

27. '5 Things to Know About Thailand's Constitutional Referendum', *The Wall Street Journal*, 26 July 2016.

28. *Ibid.*

29. 'Thai referendum: Military-written constitution approved', *BBC News*, 7 August 2016.

30. 'Thailand votes in favour of military-backed constitution', *The Guardian*, 7 August 2016.

tion were dispelled by Prawit Wongsuwan, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence, who affirmed that new election would be held as planned in 2017.³¹ With the approval of the new constitution introducing a guided democracy model there was no need for the military to further postponed the return of a civilian administration.

3. *Tensions in the restive south hit the entire country*

With a smooth royal succession and the approval of the constitutional reform, 2016 was a good year for the military junta. However, the same referendum results revealed that the country was increasingly divided and military rule seemed to have made the problem even more intractable.³² In the northern and north-eastern provinces, where Thaksin had his power bases, the referendum was unambiguously rejected. Resentments against the Bangkok elites remained intense and political repression may eventually result in new violent forms of protest. Opposition to the junta was expressed in the referendum also by the provinces in the south at the border with Malaysia. Here the problems seem to be even more urgent, but even more difficult to address, than in the north. Since the early 2000s tension in the predominantly southern Muslim provinces have escalated into a violent conflict – with, on the one hand, terrorist actions by Muslim radical groups and, on the other, harsh repression by the army that often targeted the civilian population.³³

A series of bombings occurred in the first part of the year in the southern provinces. The violence escalated on the eve of the constitutional referendum, with at least ten bomb explosions in the provinces of Narathiwat and Yala.³⁴ Even more troublesome for a military-led government who had ruled the country in the previous two years with the aim to restore peace and order, however, were the terrorist attacks in the days immediately following the referendum results. On 11 August twin bombs exploded in the seaside resort of Hua Hin, a popular tourist destination known to the population as the summer residence of the royal family. These bombs killed one Thai woman and wounded 21 persons, among which many foreign tourists. Then, the following day, two new blasts hit again the same tourist destination, this time causing only wounded.³⁵

31. 'Thai leaders say general election on track for this year', *Deutsche Welle*, 4 January 2017.

32. James Buchanan, 'Thailand's Deepening Fractures', *The Diplomat*, 8 September 2016.

33. 'No end in sight', *The Economist*, 2 January 2016.

34. 'Ten bomb blasts in Narathiwat, Yala on eve of Thai's constitutional referendum', *New Straits Times*, 7 August 2016.

35. 'Two blasts heard in Thai resort hours after overnight bombings- witness', *Reuters*, 12 August 2016.

Immediately after these bombs in Hua Hin the authorities made clear that they were suspecting the involvement of groups connected with the Red Shirts – the movement of supporters of former Premier Thaksin Shinawatra. At the same time, the Thai police ruled out international terrorism and dismissed the likelihood that the blasts had been caused by separatist insurgents from the three southern provinces. The attempt to put the blame on the Red Shirts, however, seemed quite inconsistent as the radicalized groups connected with this movement were unlikely to be able to conduct such large-scale operation. At the same time, the terrorist actions in Hua Hin seemed to repeat a quite common pattern typical of southern insurgents – twin bombs, in which the second explodes to hit those who have gathered as a consequence of the first blast.³⁶

The effort of the military to put the responsibility for the terrorist attack on the Red Shirts repeats a pattern already seen the previous year, when on 17 August 2015 a bomb near the Erawan shrine killed 20 people and wounded 120. The real authors of this bombing were not conclusively identified, even if a plausible account is that it was conducted by Uighurs terrorists in response to the fact that the Bangkok government had deported back to China 109 Muslim Uighur asylum-seekers one month earlier.³⁷ The attempt of the Thai government to divert the attention from the most likely perpetrators of the attack in Hua Hin may also have another motivation, beyond the will to use it for internal propaganda against the arch-enemy Thaksin. Acknowledging that Muslim insurgents from southern Thailand may have staged a large-scale operation in Hua Hin would have meant to recognize that the crisis in the three separatist provinces, which had already caused more than 6,000 casualties since 2004, was far from over – and this recognition was a cause of embarrassment for a military-led government.³⁸

On 6 September, terrorist actions continued in the south after bombings in Hua Hin, with other three persons killed. Although 5 Muslim insurgents were arrested by the police as suspects for the attack in Hua Hin, the authorities continued to downplay the connection of that event with the crisis in the south.³⁹

Since the insurgency began in 2004, different Thai governments have tried to suppress the protests rather than addressing the root causes of the malaise. The population in these provinces, that once belonged to the Malay Patani Sultanate and became part of Thailand in 1909, continue to require more autonomy and cultural recognition. The highly centralized Thai

36. 'Who is behind the Thailand bombings?', *BBC*, 12 August 2016.

37. Jonathan Head, 'The surreal investigations into Thailand's unresolved bombings', *BBC*, 17 August 2017.

38. *Ibid.*

39. 'Bomb kills 3 including four-year-old at Thai school', *Channel New Asia*, 6 September 2016.

state, however, considers any request for more autonomy as a threat to its sovereignty and responds accordingly. The Yingluck administration tried to open a dialogue with insurgent groups and officially the military junta did not abandon this strategy after 2014. However, *de facto* the junta refused to recognize any dialogue partner and made clear it was not ready to make any concession. At the same time, the high level of mistrust towards the Thai authorities and particularly towards the army – whose ruthless repression has often also targeted the Muslim civilian population – makes it difficult for a military-led administration to be recognized as a reliable dialogue partner by the militant groups in the south.⁴⁰

4. *Looking at China, tense relations with Washington*

After the May 2014 coup, Thai foreign policy lost momentum. Although Western countries maintained relations with the military-led government, they – including the key traditional ally, the United States – were not too keen to take any new step that could be read as a support to the coup. For example, the European Union put on hold the dialogue for a new trade liberalization agreement. Meeting of senior Western leaders with the junta members only occurred in the framework of multilateral initiatives, including an ASEAN-US Special Leaders' Summit held in California in February 2016 with the participation of Thai Prime Minister Prayuth. At the same time, however, the United States tried to continue engaging Thailand to prevent a too cosy relationship between Bangkok and Beijing. Since the end of World War II Thailand has always been particularly close to the United States. However, the emergence of China as the major regional economic power has also implied a certain realignment of Thai politics; this was a tendency that appeared to have accelerated since the 2014 coup.

A closed-doors attempt by the United States to obtain from Thailand a declaration of support for the Philippines in the China Sea judicial dispute opposing the country to China at The Hague-based Permanent Court of Arbitration did not produce any result. On the contrary, at the Shangri-La Security Forum promoted by the ASEAN⁴¹ in June 20016, Prayuth seemed to take a pro-China position with a speech –his first of importance on foreign relations – in which he criticised the United States and European Union for imposing democratic «ideology» as a prerequisite for cooperation.⁴²

40. James Buchanan, 'Thailand's Deepening Fractures'.

41. This forum allows ASEAN countries to conduct an informal dialogue open to other nations from the region and beyond such as: Australia, Canada, China, Chile, France, Germany, India, Japan, Mongolia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Russia, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Sweden, United Kingdom and the United Nations.

42. Shawn W. Crispin, 'Thailand's Post-Coup Foreign Policy: Omnidirectional or Directionless?', *The Diplomat*, 10 June 2016.

An episode occurred in May 2016 revealed the strained status of the relations between Washington and Bangkok. In order to try smoothing the difficult interactions with the junta, in 2015 the U.S. State Department selected as a new Ambassador to Bangkok the veteran diplomat Glyn Davies. However, even the experience of the senior diplomat could not help making more palatable the Obama Administration's criticism of the junta for human rights violation and delays in the roadmap for the return to democratic rule. On 17 May, when Ambassador Davis revealed that Washington was «troubled» about the arrest of an activist's mother on anti-royal charges, both Prayuth and his deputy Prawit Wongsuwan responded with not too veiled threats to the diplomat personal safety. A senior advisor to Prawit even suggested that the army officers responsible for the security of the American Embassy were personally perturbed by the United States' constant criticism of the coup-installed government.⁴³ In December 2015 Ambassador Davies had already been officially investigated for *lèse-majesté* because in a speech a month earlier he had expressed a criticism of the use of the *lèse-majesté* law by military tribunals to repress public debates through long jail sentences.⁴⁴

The tense relations with Washington may have also had a less obvious impact for Bangkok: they reduced its bargaining power in the negotiations with Beijing on different fronts. Facing isolation from Western partners, since the 2014 coup Thailand has turned to China for the purchase of armaments, also in consideration of their low cost. Moreover, in 2015 the two countries not only expanded joint naval exercises, but held first-ever joint air force ones.⁴⁵ In the summer 2016 different sources revealed that the arms deal would also include US\$1 billion purchase of three Chinese submarine and multi-billion dollars deal to upgrade the Thailand's Sattahip naval base.⁴⁶ All this, however, had a cost. First, the expansion of weaponry purchase from China is likely to further compromise the relations with Washington – Thailand's traditional provider of advanced armaments. Second, economic cooperation with China did not prove easy for Thailand, because Beijing had less reasons to prove generous given the dependent position of Bangkok. A major blow for the junta's program of economic transformation was the inability to reach an agreement with China on the construction of a high-speed rail line connecting the Thai eastern seaboard to Yunnan via Laos. The lack of an agreement shattered the junta's plan to provide infrastructure for the creation of new special economic zones in border areas in those northern provinces in which, as we saw from the referendum results,

43. *Ibid.*

44. 'Thai Police Investigate U.S. Ambassador on Suspicion of Insulting King', *The New York Times*, 9 December 2015.

45. Shawn W. Crispin, 'Thailand's Post-Coup Foreign Policy: Omnidirectional or Directionless?'

46. *Ibid.*; 'Thai navy seeks approval to buy first submarines in 65 years', *Associated Press*, 1 July 2016.

the consensus for the junta was particularly low. Insiders suggested that the inability to find an agreement between the two governments was not due to the level of the loans' interests rates, as often reported, but rather to the Chinese request to get land rights along the 845-kilometer Thai stretch of the railway.⁴⁷ As major infrastructural works have often been an instrument of the Chinese foreign policy, and their terms are regulated not only by economic but also by strategic concerns, the intransigence of Beijing seemed to depend on the weakness of the military-led Thai government.

5. *Economy: ambitious plans, but a hard reality*

In the heydays of the early 1990s Thailand was presented by the World Bank as a success story and a model for other developing countries. Rapid economic growth was seen as a result of export-orientation and the attraction of large FDI inflows. The country was purportedly on its way to repeat the «miracle» of Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore. The regional crisis 1997-98, however, crushed these dreams. Since then growth has resumed, but at much lower speed and a debate on the causes of a so-called «middle-income trap» has replaced the one on the imagined miracle ahead.⁴⁸ The failing of the previously unrealistic growth expectations and the return to a reality in which a large part of society still struggles with considerable hardships has certainly contributed the political crisis since the early 2000s.

After the Plaza Agreements in 1985 and a strong revaluation of the Japanese Yen, Thailand has become increasingly integrated in the regional production networks. This has certainly contributed to a certain level of industrial development and to the creation of a large number of job opportunities in the manufacturing sector. However, the national industry has remained largely dependent on foreign investment, technology, and management, thus scarcely improving its position in global and regional value chains.⁴⁹ Even in strategic sectors, such as automotive, Thai firms have failed to create closer linkages with foreign-led production networks through a process of incremental industrial upgrading.⁵⁰ At the same time, though, overambitious Thai authorities have continued to be fascinated by the search for the «new big thing» that could leapfrog the country towards the technological frontier. This overconfident and scarcely realistic attitude

47. Shawn W. Crispin, «Thailand's Post-Coup Foreign Policy: Omnidirectional or Directionless?».

48. Pietro P. Masina, *Il Sud Est Asiatico in trappola: storia di un miracolo mancato (Southeast Asia in Trap: History of a Missed Miracle)*. Roma: Nuova Cultura, 2013.

49. *Ibid.*

50. Richard Doner, *The Politics of Uneven Development: Thailand's Economic Growth in Comparative Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

also characterizes the economic strategy which the military junta presented in 2016. A twenty-year strategy, aiming at transforming Thailand into a developed country by 2038, was presented by Prime Minister Prayuth on 28 September. This strategy – named Thailand 4.0 – has the ambition to take the country to a fourth stage of economic development, beyond agriculture, light manufacturing and heavy industry. This strategy will focus on new «growth engines» such as biotechnology, the internet of things⁵¹ and mechatronics (a fusion of mechanics and electronics).⁵²

While the government designed its aggressive plans, the economic reality in 2016 remained uninspiring. In the midst of a global crisis the Thai economy continued to be penalised for its excessive dependence on foreign export. While the government tried to stimulate growth through large public investment, private demand and private investment remained low. The national economy continued to operate well below its capacity⁵³. At the same time, Thailand remained exposed to the competition of other countries with higher level of productivity or lower labour costs.

The removal of subsidies for rice producers – a scheme promoted by the Yingluck Administration, which had been at the centre of the protests and the eventual cause of the coup – left a large number of poor farmers in difficult conditions. An opinion poll at the end of 2016 revealed that the majority of people saw no or little improvement in the Thai economy compared to 2015. The interviewed also showed scarce optimism for the future.⁵⁴

Structurally the Thai economy continued to face the same contradictions that had characterised its transformation into a regional manufacturing hub. In order to remain competitive in low value-adding, labour intensive productions, the country had to maintain a low cost of labour across the different sectors. The inability to achieve industrial upgrading and the need to remain competitive required that the country could not see any real terms increase in industrial wages – while maintaining at the same time a large reserve army of workers very poorly paid in the informal sector or in the various areas of the shadow (or criminal) economy.⁵⁵ In this context, it is no surprise that while the government fancied about the high-tech Thailand 4.0 a part of the labour force remained trapped in bonded labour or even

51. The Internet of Things can be defined as: «The interconnection via the Internet of computing devices embedded in everyday objects, enabling them to send and receive data», Oxford Dictionaries (https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/Internet_of_things).

52. «The dangers of farsightedness», *The Economist*, 1 October 2016.

53. *Ibid.*

54. «Majority see little improvement in economy: Nida Poll», *The Bangkok Post*, 18 December 2016.

55. Pietro P. Masina, «Uneven development trap in Southeast Asia and its implications for labour», in Matteo Alcano & Silvia Vignato (eds.) *A place for work: small-scale mobility in Southeast Asia*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, forthcoming.

in modern slavery. International campaigns have targeted in particular slavery in the seafood industry after a number of investigations revealed that many fishermen were forced to work for years at sea against their will, maintained in slavery conditions through violence and physical coercion. The large attention to these cases forced Thai authorities to start addressing the issue, although a report released in late 2016 denounced that the same appalling practices continued – with Thai and foreign firms choosing to ignore the problem – in Thai fleets operating in international waters in other areas of the region.⁵⁶

Modern slavery has continued to afflict Thailand also in other areas of agriculture and food industry. Abuses have been denounced in the poultry industry, for example. However, Thai authorities have normally chosen not to investigate these cases and, in some cases, have even prosecuted the workers themselves for defamation. A case that attracted a certain level of international attention regarded the British labour rights activist Andy Hall. He faced three-and-a-half-year legal battle for a report in which he denounced the abuse of Myanmar immigrant workers by a Thai pineapple processing company. He was accused and eventually given a suspended three-year jail sentence for criminal defamation. In late October 2016, the Thai Supreme Court dismissed a set of other charges and Hall decided to leave the country and not return.⁵⁷ Opposing labour abuses has become even more difficult after the 2014 military coup given the climate of systematic violation of human rights. In this context, it appears substantially motivated by political interests – the attempt to improve bilateral relations – the US decision to remove Thailand from the list of the worst human trafficking offenders.⁵⁸

56. 'Thai fishing industry: abuses continue in unpoliced waters, Greenpeace claims', *The Guardian*, 15 December 2016.

57. Jonathan Head, 'Andy Hall, British labour rights activist, flees Thailand', *BBC*, 7 November 2016.

58. 'US to remove Thailand from list of worst human trafficking offenders', *The Straits Times*, 29 June 2016.



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